the art of precious scars

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the art of precious scars

by run_mello

Summary

Role reversal AU where Dazai is in the Port Mafia and Chuuya is in the Armed Detective Agency.

When a famous painting goes missing from the Mori Art Museum, the ADA jumps in to help investigate the case.
So Dazai and Chuuya go on a mission together, solve the mystery together, fight enemies together... and somewhere along the line, they fall in love.

Notes

Hey loves.

I'm so excited to be uploading again!

Quick disclaimer: this is canon divergent fiction so some things are laughably inaccurate and made up.
Names, abilities, places, situations, maybe even words...

Thank you for joining me on this ride, let's have some fun!

♡♡♡

See the end of the work for more notes

- Translation into Русский available: the art of precious scars by Handicapped

Prologue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For the Love of Art

Under his legal business license, Mori Ougai establishes several museums and galleries around Yokohama.

Of course, they are mostly a smokescreen, not a generous gift from an art-loving billionaire but an attempt to get a foot into the lucrative business that is the illicit trade of cultural goods.

The authorized national and international exchange of artwork between museums and galleries is predominantly a subversive device which serves to disguise the illegal trafficking of artefacts. These artefacts, generally end up on the Port Mafia's black market auctions, where anyone willing to dish up enough dirty money, can get their hands on the goods.

『○』

Dazai Osamu enters the Port Mafia at age 15 and is quickly thrown into the tows of organizing black market art auctions with all they require. It's a perfect match, Dazai mixes in with the art world like he's made to be the invisible fabric holding the enterprise together.

Under his supervision, the Port Mafia significantly expands its influence in the illicit art market.

It Takes a Diamond to Polish another Diamond

Shortly after his introduction to the art world, Dazai meets Nakahara Chuuya: a redhead with a fiery temperament, loyal disposition, and eyes so deep blue that even the sea and the sky look pale in comparison.

Chuuya is the newest member of the Armed Detective Agency, which is an initiative by Fukuzawa Yukichi, Mori's oldest and best frenemy. (The two of them dislike each other intensely, but despite their mutual animosity, they have somehow managed to build something resembling a reluctant friendship.)

Chuuya is a bit of a wildcard. Despite Fukuzawa's ability, which adjusts the power of the agency members' abilities so that they may be controlled, Chuuya still struggles to gain the upper hand on the source of his ability: an angry God that's locked up inside of him and itching to break loose.

On Mori's suggestion, Dazai and Chuuya start training together.

On paper, their abilities are a beautiful match, but the training sessions gradually reveal that the match isn't half as beautiful as it's chaotic. They're like oil and water - their every interaction a constant push and pull between Chuuya's all-consuming gravity and Dazai's all-repellent personality.

There's a sense of morbid fascination that borders on sadism to the way that Dazai pushes Chuuya to his absolute limits. He encourages Chuuya to use the corrupted state of his ability and only when he is at his breaking point, about to be consumed by his own gravity collapsing in on itself in a black hole, will Dazai come to aid him. It's a game of give and take, consisting mostly of Chuuya giving too freely and Dazai taking too greedily.

And still, Chuuya faithfully shows up to training sessions and lets Arabahaki loose without a single sign of hesitation or apprehension; he relinquishes control and puts his life in Dazai's hands. Few people would place that kind of trust in the notorious demon prodigy, but Chuuya trusts as easily as he throws punches, and it's endlessly intriguing to Dazai.

Double black

At 20, Dazai and Chuuya have required quite a reputation. Together they make for a lethal weapon, an unstoppable force that will blast through any and all obstacles.

Their strange chemistry has morphed and changed from an anti-polaric conflict to something which might suggest that opposites attract. They are still a dangerous and explosive combination, but these days, they mix in a way that produces sparks of curiosity and interest rather than antipathy.

It might just be a matter of time before those sparks catch fire.

Chapter End Notes

If you wanna talk to me, you can find me on: Tumblr or Twitter

1. The missing piece

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings: emotional manipulation (Mori), implied dissociation, implied self-harm. Aside from the manipulation, which is quite obvious, it’s something that’s just hinted at; the descriptions aren’t detailed or graphic.

Thanks for reading ♡♡♡

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The nightingale floors - that’s what Dazai calls the thick mahogany hardwood flooring in the East Wing of Port Mafia headquarters. The squeaky floors are a security device, ensuring that no one can sneak around undetected. With every step, there's a chirp, and the sound reverberates through the corridors - like a nightingale, singing 'someone is here'.

However, Dazai knows how to disappear. He has taken his shoes off and carries them in one hand as he tiptoes lightly over the floor, treading as softly as a ballerina.

Soundless. Airy. Inconspicuous.

No one will know of his presence unless he lets them know, and that’s how he likes it. (Although It’s not that he has a real reason to want to stay incognito, he just enjoys the privilege - why be loud when there’s particular pleasure in keeping silent).

He’s headed for Mori’s office to give his report on the boring job he has just finished: the decryption of a rivalling yakuza group’s secret message system.

Passing by a large window, he stops to enjoy the inpouring of early morning light. It’s not exactly a beautiful morning, Yokohama is covered in a carpet of clouds and a constant drizzle. Still, Dazai isn’t used to being up so early, and he likes to watch the sunrise whenever he gets the chance - even if it's an overcast one that paints the sky in shades of grey instead of orange.

His phone vibrates in his pocket, and even though it’s on silent mode, the vibration still creates a rather loud buzz. It's enough to shatter his reverie, so it’s with a certain degree of annoyance that he pulls it out of his pocket to check if it’s a call he’s going to accept.

'Rabid dog' glows in bright white letters on the phone screen.

Akutagawa.

Well, what kind of executive would Dazai be if he didn't accept a phone call from his most loyal subordinate?

"Isn't it a bit too early in the a.m. for you to be making calls?"

"I'm sorry, Dazai-san. Did I wake you up?"

"No, but why are *you* awake?"

"... I'm sorry."

Dazai doesn't know what Akutagawa is apologizing for. Calling? Not being asleep? Existing? Probably all of the above.

Sighing, he leans against the windowpane, admiring how his breath fogs up the glass. "It's fine. I'm not mad at you, just worried."

"Worried?"

"Mhmm. If you're going to seduce tiger boy, you'll need your beauty sleep. He seems like the kind of guy who likes pretty little things, doesn't he? He's not going to find tired, bloodshot eyes with accompanying eye bags attractive."

There's some sputtering on the other end of the line. Every time the weretiger is mentioned, Akutagawa gets amusingly flustered, and Dazai takes great pleasure in getting to work his poor subordinate up.

"How's that going, anyway?" he quips, "I got you his number a while ago, have you texted him?"

"No."

Dazai snorts. "Of course not. You're waiting for him to make the first move, aren't you?"

It's not really a question, and Akutagawa seems to understand that much, cause he doesn't answer. His breath, however, becomes audibly more shallow and the frail puffs of air produce an annoying wind tunnel-like sound on Dazai's end of the phone call.

It's a good indication that the topic of conversation is doing *things* to Akutagawa.

Dazai laughs. "Listen, he's not going to make a move on you if he doesn't even know you exist."

"He knows I exist."

"Are you sure? You come across as reserved even when you're in a sociable mood, but around him, you just completely shut down. You don't talk, you don't even d-"

"*He knows I exist*," Akutagawa hisses, and he sounds a lot like a wild goose - ridiculous - but Dazai plays nice and suppresses his natural response to laugh.

“Okay, okay. I’ll stop harassing you, now,” he appeases. “Tell me why you called.”

“Did you hear about the art theft at the Mori Art Museum?”

Dazai nods to himself. Yes, he has heard.

It’s an interesting case. The stolen piece is no other than The Great Wave by Hokusai Katsushika, a woodblock painting executed in the tradition of ukiyo-e. It's often described, as Japan’s most famous piece of art, a national treasure which is worth more money than pi has decimals.

“Of course I have. What about it?”

“The police have already given up.”

Dazai isn’t surprised in the least. The museum operates under a legal business license, and therefore the investigation should be handled by the local police. However, the Yokohama police force consists of a bunch of underperformers whose existence is defined by very little, except a sad uselessness comparable to that of a lukewarm cup of decaffeinated instant coffee. Whenever they're charged with investigative work, what inevitably happens, is that they embarrassingly quickly give up and consult the Armed Detective Agency.

“So, I'm guessing the ADA is on the case now?”

“Yes, how’d you know?” Akutagawa asks.

“The question is, how did you know before it’s even official?”

The line goes eerily silent, and at this point, Akutagawa must be holding his breath cause not even the faint hissing of his exhales, comes through.

Well, that’s fine. Dazai can guess at the answer.

“You're a stalkerish freak. If you wanna talk to Atsushi-kun so bad, then go talk to him," he chides. "Or, if you haven’t worked yourself up to the bit where you get your mouth to work properly when you’re around him, then text him. That’s the reason I got you his number in the first place. But please don’t spy on him. It’s creepy.”

Akutagawa makes an inarticulate noise between a grunt and a sniff. “I wasn’t spying on him, I just happened to see him and the uptight blonde guy on my way home from a mission, so I followed them to see what they were up to.”

“Hmm... I could point out that we live in a very big city, so the probability of you running into those two is rather small.”

There’s a long silence and then, “I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing.”

“I’m s- I mean...”

Dazai sighs. He sits down on the wide window ledge, draws his legs up and leans his forehead against his knees. “Just give your report. What were the ADA members doing? How much of their conversation did you overhear?”

“Not much. They mentioned the missing painting. They were looking for someone... I don’t remember the name. I didn’t hear more cause... they saw me… so, I… ran away.”

The information is pretty useless, and Akutagawa is so graceless that it hurts Dazai’s non-existent soul.

Dazai throws his head back in exasperation, and it hits the window, which to Dazai's great dismay doesn’t shatter from the impact.

So he does it again.

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk.

Like a trapped bird, battering its head against a windowpane, refusing to recognize its existence.

“Oh wow, that's so unsubtle." Dazai lets out a heavy exhale, "There's a reason I never assign you to undercover work, huh?” he says.

“I’m sor-”

“Oh? What’s that? I can't hear you. Bad connection,” he lies and then hangs up.

He doesn’t want to hear another apology, and he doesn't have the time or patience to lecture Akutagawa on the art of proper espionage, so really, there’s nothing more to be gained, for either one of them, from the conversation.

Agilely sliding down from the window ledge, he places both feet carefully on the floor and proceeds - still on his toes.

He comes up to two broad-shouldered men in black suits, who stand guard in front of Mori's office. Neither one of them is distracted by the fact that Dazai is holding his shoes in his hands rather than wearing them on his feet.

It’s not exactly common to see executives walking around barefooted in the halls, but Dazai has made a bit of a habit out of it - maybe that's part of the reason he’s being regarded as an eccentric.

“Dazai-sama,” one of them greets as they both bow their heads in perfect synchrony.

“Hi, boys〜” Dazai simpers. “What do you think about my socks? am I making them work for me?”

Dazai is wearing pastel blue socks. There are little hearts on them, and they're probably a bit too cutesy to be cool, but they’re a gift from Kouyou, so Dazai wears them with pride.

The guards both drop their gaze down to behold the pastel dream on Dazai's feet.

“Yes, absolutely. Stylish as ever,” one of them says. “The boss is waiting for you. Please proceed.”

Dazai holds up a finger, "One second, let me just." He drops his shoes to the floor and steps into them. "Okay. I'm ready. Open sesame" Dazai chirps and the guards duly open the door for him to step through.

"Good morning Mori-san, it is I, your most valued executive," he introduces himself as he enters. The heavy door closes behind him with a loud thud.

“Ah, Dazai-kun, I’ve been expecting you.”

Mori is sitting by his office table with a scalpel in his hand, toying with it like it's a fidget-spinner. There's a steaming cup of tea by his side and an open book in front of him.

Dazai peeks down at the pages and notes that it's an anatomy book. No surprise there.

He also notices that Mori seems to have acquired a new antiquity: a globe that (at least from the angle Dazai is viewing it at) has a very outdated map of the world. It stands on the edge of the desk, opposite of a pompous monstrosity of a vintage rotary phone. Both objects are laced in intricate golden details - almost rococo in their flamboyance - and imply that Mori cares more about the decorative design-aspects of his office items than their functionality. Dazai knows that to be false, though. Mori is nothing if not a pragmatic rationalist so if he chooses to surround himself with old-world technologies, which to a modern eye appear behind the times, there’s a reason for it.

The old phone serves a well-defined purpose - a landline is harder to hack. Also, only a select group of people have the number to that phone.

The globe, though...

“What exactly is the purpose of that thing?” Dazai asks, pointing at it.

“Take a guess.”

Dazai sighs. “Why can’t you just tell me?”

“You have a brain, use it. I haven’t worked so hard to give you a proper education, teaching you everything I know, for you to refuse to apply your intellect.”

At this point, Dazai severely regrets asking about the globe’s purpose, but there’s no taking it back, so he starts looking for clues. An old-fangled map of the world and an anatomy book add together to…?

He glances at the open page in the anatomy book, which Mori’s reading, remarking that it shows detailed pictures of arteries. He studies the globe again, and observes that it is colour-coded; different areas shaded in different hues - almost as though it represents the distribution of… something...

“Is this about the blood type theory?” he asks.

Mori smiles, it’s a smug and frightful thing. “Yes.”

“You believe in that stuff?”

“Maybe,” he replies, cryptically. “*Your* personality certainly fits your blood type very well.”

Dazai shrugs in answer. He’s not big on self-analysis and avoids thinking about his own character traits if he can.

Mori continues. “The AB type is quite rare, did you know? it accounts for only 3 percent of the Japanese population.”

“Rare, huh? Are you telling me that I'm special, boss?”

Mori shakes his head. His face still holds that annoying, smug grin. “Fishing for compliments?”

Dazai purses his lips. This isn’t the conversation he wants to have, and he doesn't know why he even started it.

“I’m here to report,” he deflects.

“Of course. Go ahead.”

“I deciphered the syndicate’s secret messages, and I’ve read through everything they’ve sent back and forth for the past couple of months. There’s no reason to suspect that they’re spying on our warehouses or planning a raid, so the shipments should be safe for n-”

---RIiiiiiiiiIIinnnNNnNg---

The vintage rotary telephone phone on Mori’s desk gives off the most unnecessarily loud and migraine-inducing ring. It vibrates violently, and Dazai glares at it with venom in his eyes. On an intellectual level, he understands that an inanimate object won’t feel threatened by his murder-stare. On an emotional level though, he can’t help but feel great resentment towards the old telephone, which has no business existing in modern-day Yokohama, when it looks like something that belongs back in the 1930s.

Mori holds up a hand, signalling for Dazai to stand-by as he answers the call. Dazai offers a dull smile and nods in understanding - he's used to it. It’s not the first time Mori decides that whoever is on the line is more important and worthy of his attention than Dazai is. It’s fine. After all, he was only in the middle of talking about how he single-handedly outsmarted a competing illegal trade organization.

Mori picks up the receiver. There's a smirk on his lips like he already knows who is calling, even though the phone is obviously too old to be equipped with caller identification.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” he says as he wraps the phone cord around a finger.

Dazai entertains himself by looking around the familiar office in the hopes of finding something for his eyes to rest on, while the boss is on the phone.

Nothing catches his interest. The walls around him are as red as always, the temperature as low as always and the general vibe of the room as gothic as always. There's something particularly melancholic about how the heavy half-drawn curtains restrict the inpouring of cloud-shaded sun-light, though. The morning rain that falls gently on the other side of the floor-to-ceiling windows is perfectly pretty; like a familiar layer of wet dust that covers the city in mellowness. Mori's office, on the other hand, is neither warm enough to feel familiar nor illuminated enough to show the dust particles in the room. And dust is a strange thing to be missing, but Dazai misses it nonetheless - it would make the room less sterile and hence be an enormous improvement to the aggressively lifeless atmosphere.

Dazai isn't actively listening in on the conversation, but he nonetheless registers everything that's being said, implied and insinuated. His brain doesn't have an off-switch, and its lowest setting is 'racing', so absorbing information isn't a choice as much as it is something that *just happens*.

Consequently, he *just happens* to know that the caller is the president of the ADA. (It's still early morning, and out of the few people who have the direct number to Mori's office, Fukuzawa is the only one who would call so early.)

And with the president of the ADA on the line and Mori stealing glances at Dazai, in a way which suggests that he is the topic of conversation, it's easy enough for Dazai to deduce what the phone call is about: The agency is requesting his participation in the investigation - presumably because his nullifying ability is needed.

Mori is still fiddling with the phone cord like a cat playing with yarn.

"Very well," he says, eyes settling in on Dazai. "I shall send him over at once."

He delicately returns the handset to its cradle, and Dazai, who finds unfinished business awfully tedious, and prefers to finish the report on one mission before he's sent on a new one, takes it as his prompt to start talking.

"As I was saying before I was interrupted by... that thing," he waves in the general direction of the archaic telephone, "I deciphered their messages easily and-"

"Yes that's great, I've heard all I need to know. Let's move on to discuss your next job," Mori says in a distant, stoic voice. His eyes are fixed on a spot somewhere above Dazai's head.

Dazai isn't surprised by Mori's words, but he *is* surprised by the way his abdomen clenches in response to those words; almost as though it's turning in on itself - organs setting out, imploding in rebellion against something that Dazai can't fathom.

It burns fiercely and blends, in a very uncomfortable way, with the cold emptiness that always sits heavy in his stomach.

It’s a rather strange sensation; there’s that endless void that he has carried around for as long as he can remember. (He attributes it to *No Longer Human*, sees it as a sort of side effect of his ability, and has learned to live with it. Or rather, coexist alongside it.)

But then there’s that gut-wrenching nausea on top of it, and they combine to form a blazing inferno of… Dazai doesn’t even know what it is he's feeling.

He feels queasy, but pretending to be fine when he’s not is one of his many talents.

He plasters an overly pleasant smile on his face and clears his throat, before talking.

“Ah yes, my next job. I can’t wait to hear about it. What will it be, boss?” he says, the words falling from his lips as easily as rain falls from the clouds.

Very few people would notice Dazai’s inner turmoil, his expression is as calm as the surface of a lake below freezing point, but Mori’s an entirely different breed of perceptive snake.

Of course, he notices that something’s amiss.

His eyes go from being distant to being focused in a millisecond as they hone in on Dazai. There’s an intensity to the gaze that could rival laserbeams, and Dazai feels like they burn through layers of clothes, bandages and skin, exposing him most unpleasantly.

“Oh?” Mori says, and there’s an almost accusatory edge to his voice, “You mean to tell me that you haven't already figured out what your next job is?”

“You’re the one who brought it up. If you thought I already knew, why even mention it?”

“You’re absolutely right. I needn’t have asked, you already understand don’t you?”

“Of course,” Dazai says, swallowing the lump in his throat, all the way down till it sits heavily in his stomach alongside that dumb sensation, which doesn’t seem to want to go away.

Mori pulls back his chair and stands up in one languid movement, approaching Dazai slowly, hands clasped behind his back. He comes up to stand right in front Dazai who’s fairly uncomfortable with the invasion of personal space but still doesn’t move one way or the other.

Mori grabs Dazai’s chin to direct his head back and look into his eyes.

“Tell me, Dazai-kun,” he implores, “is something bothering you?”

He lets Dazai’s chin go and takes a step back, tilting his head, as though he’s only asking an innocent question.

Dazai knows better. This is an interrogation.

And despite running a thorough mental analysis of all the things that could explain what he’s feeling, he fails to come up with a believable answer to Mori’s question. Is it hunger? Seems

unlikely, he's never in his life felt either thirst or hunger, why would he start now. Ripped appendix? When would it have happened, though? He hadn't had one of those godawful get-captured-and-tortured-to-gather-intel jobs in a long time. Period cramps? Well, unless Dazai has thoroughly misunderstood male biology, that's easily ruled out too.

He can't just say that he isn't feeling well, cause that's way too vague. It leaves a hell of a lot of room for interpretation, and Mori has no concept of boundaries; is happy to walk into that room without invitation and decorate it as he sees fit. It's invasive and bothersome.

Eventually, he settles on the easiest and safest option, the perfect response to most questions: a lie.

"Nothing's bothering me. I'm perfectly fine," he says jovially as he shoves his hands into his pockets. His new smartphone is in his left pocket, and his hand clutches around it, holding on to it as though it's a lucky charm (not that Dazai believes in those).

Mori looks unconvinced. "You should know that I understand you better than anyone. I know when you lie, and I know why you feel the need to do it. So, you might as well tell me what's wrong."

Dazai suppresses a shiver. He wonders what the point of confession is when the answer is - ostensibly - already known. He supposes it's just a demonstration of power on Mori's behalf.

"Who said I lied? There's a lot of leeway between an outright lie and a modified truth," Dazai defends.

"The difference is minuscule. An overt lie is as bad as a covert truth. Both are attempts to seek a bit of relief from a ponderous, suffocating reality."

Dazai hums. "Sounds like you know what you're talking about."

Mori offers one of his signature creepy half-smiles. There's a strong hint of viciousness in the bending of his lips.

"But the liar, like the addict, gradually comes to need larger and larger doses. The lies grow and become more complex… I wouldn't want you to end up like that, all twisted up, in your own web of deception."

"You often encourage me to lie," Dazai points out.

"Only when necessary, Dazai-kun. You shouldn't lie to me, though. Come on, tell me what's on your mind."

Thoughts compete for space in Dazai's brain, and though he desperately attempts to catch one and hold on to it long enough to turn it into a rational explanation, they're racing by at a hundred miles per hour, and he can't keep up. The gaping hole of emptiness inside of him, which usually just feels like an endless void of boredom and nothingness, is now complaining loudly - it seems like it's demanding *something* to fill it.

Mori looks at him with endless amounts of fake patience. “There’s something you want to say. Say it," he prompts, eyes boring into Dazai, prodding, pressing, pushing.

Dazai feels those red eyes like fire on his skin.

“I think I'm just tired, Mori-san,” he confabulates. He doesn’t know if what he's feeling is tiredness, but he never knows what he's feeling, so it’s as good an explanation as any.

“I’ve been working really hard, lately. Haven’t had much time to catch up on sleep.”

Dazai attempts to form a smile around the words, but he suspects it looks more like a grimace.

“Ah, I see. This is your round-about way of telling me that you want a bonus for your hard work, isn’t it?”

“No?” Dazai says, cringing internally at what should have been an assertive answer but ends up sounding more like a question. His attempt to hold onto a pretence of indifference is slipping through his fingers like sand.

“No?” Mori parrots.

And Dazai nods cause the strange and unpleasant sensation in his core isn’t subsiding - the promise of a monetary reward does nothing to placate it.

It seems that although money is a universal language, it isn’t a universal cure. A gaping hole of emptiness can’t be filled by coins and paper, it devours everything, leaves nothing behind and doesn’t stop until all that once made sense is gone - only meaninglessness remains.

Something about the whole situation throws Dazai off balance. He gets the sense that he is being put through a test that he has no chance of passing. He doesn’t much like the idea of failing, so instead, he opts out and evades.

“Anyway, The detective agency expects me, don’t they? I shouldn’t keep them waiting.”

He spins on the back of his heel and walks towards the doors as fast as he can, which isn’t as fast as he would like it to be. For some reason, he feels like he is moving through molasses, an invisible and thick substance caging him in like a restrictive full-body corset.

“Hold it,” Mori commands.

Dazai stops in his tracks. “Yes boss?” he says, back still turned to Mori, looking down at his feet and fantasising about the wonders of being able to use them to run away.

“Why are you in such a hurry? We're not done yet. Turn around, please.”

Dazai reluctantly obeys. He slowly turns around and raises his gaze from the ground to focus on Mori, training his eyes on the spot between the boss’ brows, close enough to pass for real eye contact.

Mori claps once, and immediately sharp overhead spotlights turn on. The overly bright LED light bounces off the red walls in a way which intensifies Dazai's ongoing discomfort significantly.

"I find it hard to believe that you're just tired. You looked outright disappointed when I offered you a bonus. What's that about?" Mori sounds genuinely intrigued, and that's never a good sign. There's nothing more foreboding than Mori's curiosity. He's a doctor, after all, a surgeon, which means that he dissects the things that he wishes to understand more clearly. There's so much blood on his hands, and Dazai really doesn't want to play his patient.

"Does it matter?" Dazai asks, feeling more off-kilter than he allows his casual tone to portray.

Mori sweeps his eyes over Dazai's face in an inquisitive manner. "Doesn't it?"

Dazai frowns. So what if he seems disappointed? For the most part, he's just annoyed with himself for letting his mask slip long enough for Mori to read anything at all on his face.

Dazai doesn't know what to do so he does what he does best, and reverts to his default mode of the carefree and distant clown: he laughs, all teeth, and slitted eyes. A sunny laugh goes a long way to cover up or repair subtle nonverbal communication, and Dazai uses those like other people use duct tape, that is, like all-purpose gluey stuff, which holds broken things together without actually repairing them.

However, the usual solution is failing him hard: the way his cheeks stretch around the smile feels too fabricated, and the way his shoulders shake with the hollow sound that comes out of his mouth, has a bit of a hysterical edge.

He struggles to keep his composure as he carries on the charade. "Oh, you know me. Whenever I'm asked what I want, my first impulse is to answer nothing. Is money what I want? No. But it's more than nothing, so I don't see why I would be disappointed." He aims for a careless sing-song voice, but somehow there's a robotic quality to it that Mori doesn't miss if the way his nostrils flare with bloodlust is any indication.

"Indeed, why would you? Maybe you were hoping for something else?" Mori says conversationally.

He reaches for Dazais wrist and pulls it towards himself so that Dazai's bandage-covered arm stretches out between them like a bridge. For the most part, Dazai doesn't particularly enjoy other people touching him, but he's feeling strangely muddled - too groggy to object.

And so, he doesn't resist it when Mori un-tugs the bandage from where it's fastened around his wrist.

Upon contact, Dazai can feel the clammy vibe of Mori's nasty ability as *No Longer Human* nullifies it.

It's times like these that Dazai bemoans the fact that his ability seems to have mentalist-like properties. The nullification somehow channels information about every ability it comes in

contact with - information that Dazai often would rather be without - and in the case of the boss, he's left with a bitter feeling, like the blood in his veins has been replaced with vinegar.

Mori slowly peels off the bandage, revealing a pale forearm that hasn't seen the sun in years but on the other hand, appears to be intimately familiar with sharp objects.

He studies it for a second, then rolls the bandage back on and re-fastens it. "Still haven't shaken your bad habit?"

He loses his hold of Dazai's wrist, and the arm immediately flops down heavy and lifeless along Dazai's side.

Dazai's world is starting to look blurry, and his self-possession is wearing thin. "What do you want, Mori-san?" he mutters, feeling strangely lopsided - like he's steering his body from afar, not entirely present.

"That's the wrong question." Mori returns, "the real question is: what do *you* want?"

Dazai closes his eyes to gather his thoughts. Answering an unanswerable question is awfully hard. "I told you, I don-"

"Maybe you wanted me to tell you that you've done a good job?"

It's just a simple question, but it registers as a threat to Dazai.

The stupid sensation in his stomach, which he's yet to identify, makes itself very apparent again. Nothing about it makes sense, and Dazai feels like he's drowning.

In an attempt to cling to his mask of aloofness, he smiles wider. His insides might be sinking with the heaviness of a bag full of bricks, but there's no reason not to aim for lightness on the outside. He takes a deep breath to ground himself and mentally wills the fog in his mind away.

"Oh, Don't be ridiculous, Mori-san. I don't need you to praise me, it would sound weird and unnatural coming from you," Dazai says as breezily as he can manage. "I bet you're the type of person who makes compliments sound like insults."

As soon as the words are out of his mouth, Dazai realizes that his put-on overzealous tone, which is supposed to sound kind of fake, is so over-the-top that it fails to function as a defence and ends up sounding more like what it truly is - a desperate attempt to regain footing.

Apparently impression-management is much like painting; add too many layers, and the paint will crack, Dorian-Gray-style, to reveal the horrible truth underneath.

Dazai immediately stores that new-gained knowledge away as an important note-to-self, but although it's a good learning experience it doesn't help him resolve the problem at hand - the problem being the boss who's looking at him knowingly.

“It sounds like I hit the nail on its head. That’s sweet. You wanted me to tell you how good you’ve been?”

Dazai opens his mouth to answer, but Mori interrupts.

“You think you deserve that, though?” he says, and although it’s spoken softly, there’s a force behind the words, which propels them into the room and nearly knocks Dazai over.

“You’re kind of greedy, Dazai-kun. I know how you treat your subordinates, but you expect me to treat you differently? You can be harsh with them, but you want me to be soft with you?”

The tightness in Dazai’s stomach threatens to swallow him whole, and his ears are ringing, an audible buzz rattling against the walls of his cranium with paralyzing effect.

And to make everything worse, Mori is looking rather grave. It’s the look he wears when he is about to deliver a long-winded diatribe against someone.

“Be careful Dazai-kun. I know that you've always had a propensity towards attention-seeking behaviours, which is fine, cause the spotlight loves you, and the power of charm suits you. As long as you understand how to harness it, I won’t object. But don’t take it too far. You shouldn't have to rely on others' approval.”

He raises an admonishing finger. “It could end up making you vulnerable, and I don’t accept weakness from my prodigy.” The words reverberate like a bucket of stones and water thrown onto concrete, and Dazai struggles to shield himself - to take the sense of vertigo out of the hollow echoes.

“No-no. I don’t want-”

“You act like you do.”

Dazai has an irrational impulse to stump his food or storm out and slam the door behind himself, like a two-year-old who’s having a temper tantrum. But he knows that if he loses his cool, Mori will read that as an affirmation to his previous statement.

“Listen, if you want me to react differently just tell me how and I’ll give you a brilliant performance, okay?”

Mori clicks his tongue in annoyance. “There’s no need to get defensive. I'm not bringing this up to shame you. I'm doing it because I care. I only want the best for you. You know that, right?”

Dazai doesn’t doubt it. He does, however, doubt that Mori knows what it means to care, and worries that his version of ‘wanting the best’ for Dazai might just be the absolute worst.

“I don’t know anything, boss. Can I leave now?” Dazai says, but it completely lacks bite and is, overall, a rather weak escape attempt.

“Your development got stuck in that moody teenager phase, didn’t it? Please try to mature a little. I’m trying to teach you a valuable life lesson, be smart and take it.”

“I appreciate the concern, but I don’t rely on anyone for anything… least of all valuable life lessons.”

“You certainly do. I’m not the best person to have this conversation with, though. Why don’t you go talk to Kouyou-kun about it?”

Daazi *will*, but he *won’t* let the boss know that he’s accepting advice.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” he says, flippant and - he hopes - confident enough to sound credible.

Mori raises a hand to his forehead, rubbing his temple as if to ward off a headache. “There’s plenty to talk about. I expect you to figure it out and find some outlet for it that isn’t going to compromise you. Don’t turn it into a problem.” He turns around 90 degrees and walks towards the windows, which seem to have caught his attention, although the view they offer is obscured by rain and fog. “You’re dismissed now.”

Without bothering with the formality of bowing, Dazai promptly spins on his heel and stalks out the door.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed! kudos and comments are appreciated. If you wanna comment, but don’t know what to say, just smash the keyboard I appreciate that too ♡
More notes:
- Blood type personality theory: there are plenty of articles on it out there if you’re interested. I just wanna mention here that It’s not a scientifically verified theory but it’s fun the same way that astrology is fun (I hope I’m not offending anyone by saying this. Please don’t come for me astrology people. Ps. I’m a Capricorn). Anyway, it’s popular in Japan. The wiki fandom page says that Dazai is AB. According to my (limited) research, the AB types are: rational, talented/intelligent, critical, aloof, and “eccentric”
Bonus info: Chuuya’s blood type is B, and B types are: Passionate, active, creative, flexible, friendly and impatient.
Extra bonus info: AB’s and B’s are very compatible romantically :)
- The Mori Art Museum actually exists. For real. It’s founded by Minuoir Mori and is located in Tokyo… for the purpose of this story, we’re just going to pretend it’s owned by another Mori and is located in Yokohama…
- Ukiyo-e: a Japanese art form based on the Buddhist concept, ukiyo - the sadness (uki) of life (yo).

- Dazai and Chuuya are both 20 in this. Everyone else is the same age as they are in the current canon timeline… If this is weird or annoying to you, just ignore it. It's not important and barely even mentioned in the story. I'm only doing it because I like to think about what Chuuya was like at 20… we see him at 15, 18 and then again at 22, but what about all the in-between stuff???
- I've borrowed some lines: "There's particular pleasure in keeping silent" - Exhaustion by Nakahara Chuuya and "his expression giving no insight into what he was thinking, as calm as the surface of a lake below freezing point" - English translation of 15.

2. 17 days

Chapter Summary

> “Ever heard of Kintsugi?”

Chapter Notes

> Thank you to everyone who's been reading this story and left kudos and comments. I can't say how much I appreciate your kindness ♡♡♡♡♡
>
> Chapter notes:
>
> Kintsugi - the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery by mending the areas of breakage with gold.
>
> Chapter warnings:
> Claustrophobia and agoraphobia (Dazai).
> The claustrophobia is mentioned, and the agoraphobia is implied. I don’t think it’s going to be triggering or uncomfortable to read. There are no instances of panic or intense anxiety - a lot of the anxiety issues are kinda bubbling just beneath the surface and Dazai barely registers it cause he’s kinda bad at identifying his own feelings… so... I think it’s fairly safe to read even if you struggle with anxiety, but I just wanted to give you a heads up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There’s a sleek black car with tinted windows waiting for Dazai when he exits headquarters.

He climbs into the backseat of the car and makes note of his chauffeur of the day: a petite woman with a septum piercing and bleached hair. Dazai has only met her once before but remembers her name to be Tanaka Yui.

She turns around in her seat to greet him with a timid smile on her red-painted lips and a wave of her hand.

“Good morning, Dazai-sama.”

Dazai flashes a blinding smile of his own in return. It’s not at all sincere, but it’s all he has to offer to uphold his reputation of being ‘charming’, which, incidentally, is just a more succinct way of saying ‘dazzling people with bullshit’.

“Hello, Tanaka-chan〜 It’s been so long since I last saw you. Where have you been?”

“Don’t worry. I’ve been tending to my job. If you wanted to see me more often, you could always have me assigned as your private chauffeur.”

“How sweet. I’m sure you wouldn’t want to be stuck with me, though.”

“Oh, don’t say that. It would be an honour.”

Dazai shrugs, noncommittal.

“Anyway, I'm heading over to the Mori Art Museum. You know the way, get me there as fast as possible, please.”

The driver nods and then starts the engine, which comes to life with a subtle hum that flutters through the car.

Her eyes scan over Dazai, in the rearview mirror.

“May I remind you that the seatbelt is there for your safety and that wearing it greatly decreases the chances of injury should we get in an accident,” she says. There's an aura of subdued authority to the way she voices the reminder, which is typical of people who take great pride in their job.

Dazai puffs out a little laugh.

“You may. I don’t know what you expect me to do with that information, though,” he quips, and Tanaka, to her credit, doesn’t argue the point.

She nods and then pulls the car out into traffic, forcing it in between the tightly crammed vehicles, which move through the rush-hour like items on a conveyor belt.

Dazai looks out the window with unfocused interest. The raindrops splatter on the glass in a pattern so perfectly artistic, so beautifully random, that only nature could create it.

Of course, nothing, with the possible exception Dazai’s own ever-changing moods, is ever truly random, and for some reason, knowing that takes away a bit of the enjoyment he gets out of watching the rain fall.

The Mori Art Museum slowly comes into view. It’s located on the top floors of a large modern skyscraper, Roppongi Hills, that’s strangely non-imposing for its size. Something about the reflective glass exterior and the cherry trees that decorate the road up to the museum, makes it seem prettier than a large highrise has the right to.

Dazai takes out his phone from his pocket to check the time. If traffic behaves as predicted, which it always does, he’ll arrive in less than 7 minutes.

That should give him plenty of time to make some qualified guesses about which agency members he’ll be greeted by upon arrival - who, he’ll get the pleasure of pestering.

If Dazai is being honest (which he rarely is, but cloudy, rainy days create a certain mood, which inspires honesty), he hopes it's Chuuya.

He hasn't seen Chuuya in a while, 17 days to be specific, and he is starting to feel... something... about the long no-contact period.

『○』

The last time they saw each other had ended a bit unexpectedly.

They'd been assigned a mission together, which had gone south and forced Chuuya to use corruption. Dazai had pulled him out of it just a little faster and gentler than he usually does, and then… then Chuuya had practically thrown himself at Dazai with wild desperation. And although some of it could be blamed on the post corruption haze, Dazai doesn't think anyone kisses like *that*, unless they've fantasised about it, and craved it for a long time.

Maybe Dazai should have expected it.

The mutual attraction between them has been palpable for a while, and Chuuya is nothing if not a go-getter. In a sense, Dazai supposes the kiss was inevitable; tension can only build for so long before it either explodes with a bang or implodes with a whimper.

And isn't that exactly what happened?

『○』

Dazai can still feel the phantom press of chapped lips against his own, still taste the kiss on his tongue, still hear his own muted whimpers.

He wouldn't mind doing it again, which is somewhat of a surprising realization. Kissing usually isn't something he enjoys all that much. It certainly isn't something he spends a great deal of time daydreaming about once it's over.

Rather, it's something he allows because of his temptation to explore the things that unsettle him - like the child who squeezes his pet all the harder when he actually fears it a little.

In fact, Dazai tends to engage in physical contact, in general, like it's a strange dance between repulsion and morbid curiosity: not something he dislikes enough to resist, but also not something he particularly wants.

With Chuuya, though, it's different. Dazai thinks that he might want more of it - all of it: the kisses, the closeness, the feeling of being held.

He sighs deeply and taps the window like one might tap a fishbowl to get a reaction out of the fish. The raindrops keep flowing down the glass in thick streams, undisturbed.

Dazai leans forward. “Tell me, Tanaka-kun, do you enjoy art?”

The driver shrugs, a small motion that registers more as the annoying sound her seatbelt makes when she moves her shoulders than anything else.

“I guess,” she says.

“You guess?”

“Who doesn’t?”

“People who don’t understand it...”

Tanaka chuckles softly. “Art isn’t supposed to be understood, it’s supposed to be felt.”

Dazai nods listlessly. “How sentimental, but I suppose what you say is probably correct. That would be the normal way to think.”

“I don’t know about normal. Don’t care much either,” she replies while keeping her eyes fixed on the road.

Dazai admires her ability to prioritize.

“I don’t know much about normal either,” he admits and flops back in the comfortable seat. He tries to focus on the smoothness of the leather rather than life’s complexities - art, normality… Chuuya.

The car comes to a halt in front of the entrance to the museum, and Dazai opens the door and jumps out.

“Thanks for the ride〜 you’re my favourite chauffeur,” he calls over his shoulder.

“You say that to all the drivers, don't you?”

Dazai grins and slams the car door shut, in lieu of a 'goodbye'.

Tanaka doesn’t take the hint. Instead of accepting the dismissal, she raises a single finger and then presses it down hard on the power window button. The driver's side window rolls down with a seamless electronic buzzing sound.

“Want me to wait for you?” she asks, her voice merry like tingling silver bells, and laced with endless patience.

The fakeness of it makes Dazai very uncomfortable even though he knows he has no right to judge.

“No, I have a feeling this might take some time. Just stay on call,” he says as he waves a hand dismissively.

The window sweeps back up with a very unsatisfying clanking sound that it didn’t produce on its way down; a sound that can only exist in the strange world of wet friction created by rain-soaked glass and a stressed electric motor mechanism that works against gravity.

That too, makes Dazai very uncomfortable, and it’s not even 10 am yet.

The car takes off, and Dazai turns around to face the entrance of Roppongi Hills. He takes a deep breath, inhaling the aroma of wet pavement. He lets the air out slowly as he makes an almost imperceptible humming sound, which calms his sleep-deprived, hypervigilant nervous system down a little.

He looks around to check for important information, burning the visual image of the surroundings into his brain.

The place is extremely crowded, giving off a vibe that reminds Dazai of a massive anthill. It’s making his skin crawl, and the way large amounts of people filter in and out of the tall skyscraper provides lots of opportunities to feel overstimulated: all the bright clothing and private little conversations blur together to form a huge wave of sensory distortion.

He doesn’t see anything suspicious, but he does see a hideous pink motorcycle, *Chuuya’s motorcycle*, parked under a blossoming cherry tree; petals and metal blending together in a collage of pink.

Dazai almost starts clapping his hands with glee, but he manages to stop himself. There’s CCTV - anyone could be watching - and no one needs to know how excited Dazai gets about a bright pink dirt bike.

With lifted spirits and the collar of his black trench coat popped, Dazai aims for the large entrance hall. He advances with determination, sifting through the crowd of people with relative ease and waving his Mori Corporation badge at the security service personnel, before stuffing it haphazardly into one of his many pockets.

Bypassing the long line to the elevators, he darts towards one which doors are about to close.

He makes it just in time to slide in through the closing doors, nearly slamming into a tall woman with a red shawl wrapped around her like a blanket.

"Sorry about that, Miss," he apologises.

The woman offers a very tight-lipped smile in return. "S'alright," she responds, but the way she says it makes it sound like a curse word.

It's a tight squeeze in the elevator, and Dazai doesn't much enjoy being sandwiched between the tall women that he nearly knocked over and her equally tall friend. They both wear incredibly heavy perfumes, which trigger some sort of allergic reaction in him. He holds his

breath all the way to the 52nd floor, where the Hokusai Collection is located, while resolutely reminding himself that he doesn't have claustrophobia.

The elevator moves so fast that it almost makes Dazai motion sick and the upward acceleration causes him to feel like he's being flattened, crushed like a bug in the ground.

The doors open and he rushes out, gulping in air and hyperventilating as he makes his way through the main exhibition room. It's full of museum-goers and significantly more security guards than usual - probably because of the recent theft. The walls are adorned with impressionist paintings from the industrial era, but despite their understated beauty, which so artfully conveys the anxiety of modern life, a fair amount of the visitors turn their eyes to Dazai as he strides through the room, wheezing like a steam train.

Although he could easily repress it if he wanted to, he purposely overplays the frantic heaving for breath. He likes harvesting a bit of sympathy from strangers, they tend to give it away easily, and Dazai has never been one to bypass low hanging fruits.

He comes up to the room which houses the Hokusai Collection, along with a number of other featured artists and some rare antiquities from the Edo period.

It's closed down for the public, yellow barricade tape with the words 'police line - do not cross', marking off the entrance.

Dazai agilely ducks under it and moves into the room, noticing a couple of things along his path.

Firstly, the motion detectors around the empty spot on the wall that belongs to The Great Wave, have been covered with little pieces of cardboard.

Secondly, and infinitely more interestingly, Chuuya is standing in the middle of the room. He's wearing the most abhorrent, mismatched outfit Dazai has seen in a long while - a red bomber jacket over an oversized purple hoodie, tight jeans, high rise chunky boots and the signature choker around his neck. His hands are on his hips, and he's oozing the kind of confidence that is so rare to come by; unshakable self-assurance so pure that it never even teeters on the edges of arrogance. He is clearly comfortable in his own skin, even if that skin is clothed in ridiculous layers of foul fashion mistakes.

Dazai makes a quick decision: Chuuya presumably feels awkward and self-conscious about their last rendezvous, so Dazai needs to do something to break the ice, and the first step to doing that is to act normal: Like nothing out of the ordinary is going on. Like seeing Chuuya again isn't making him so unsteady on his feet that he's starting to worry that he might have sustained some kind of vestibular nerve damage. Like he hasn't spent an inordinate amount of time thinking about that fatal kiss.

"O-hoy, Slug. Fancy seeing you here." Dazai trills as he makes his way up to Chuuya, who's looking at him with equal parts irritation and excitement.

"Finally. I've been waiting for almost half an hour. What took you so long?!"

“Driving through midtown, during rush hour,” Dazai states matter of factly.

“There’s this thing called the metro. You should try it, sometime.”

Dazai wrinkles his nose. The idea of being trapped in a tightly packed underground doesn’t sound appealing to him. “I'd rather not go down into those hell tunnels, thanks.”

“What? You’re too elevated to be around common people? Can’t go anywhere without your private chauffeur?" Chuuya asks through clenched teeth. "You’re such a snobbish brat.”

“That’s a bit hypocritical, don't you think? It’s not like *you* favour public transport. I saw your pink abomination parked outside.”

Chuuya's body visible tenses, hands turning into fists and face tightening around a scowl. “Oi. Have some respect. I’ll have you know that my bike is one of the best models sold in Japan,” he scoffs, “also, you must be colourblind, cause it’s magenta, not pink.”

Dazai shoulders shake with silent laughter. “Who’s sounding snobbish now?”

Chuuya’s eyes narrow and there’s practically steam coming out of his ears. “Don’t turn this around on me!“ He points an accusing finger at Dazai, “you are the most annoying person, I’ve ever met in my entire life.”

Chuuya’s aggression, though familiar, is bombastically overblown, and Dazai easily recognises it for what it is: defensiveness.

He can’t say that he understands why Chuuya feels the need to act out like that, because of a single kiss, but facts are facts, and those are not to be reasoned with, those are to be blasted through with grand gestures.

Dazai quickly scans the room. A few feet behind him there's a massive Chinese-style carved vase standing on top of a tall pedestal. The thing is an impressive display of craftsmanship, but in terms of aesthetics, it’s positively vulgar in its gaudiness. Somehow the vase gives off a vibe of self-importance, and Dazai thinks that it needs to be knocked down a few pegs… or completely knocked over.

He places himself strategically, right in front of the pedestal. Then he gives Chuuya a challenging look.

“I may be the most annoying person you’ve ever met, but you’re wearing the most unsightly outfit the world has ever seen.” He sweeps his gaze down Chuuya’s form, appraising, judging. “And I’m not colourblind, but that colour combination makes me wish I were.”

Chuuya’s nostrils flare with anger, and Dazai smiles wider. Everything is going to plan.

“Your shoes are nice, though,” he says, looking at Chuuya’s shoes with as much pure adoration as he can without seeming over the top. “I really like your shoes.”

Chuuya’s eyes widen comically.

“You do?” he asks as he directs his eyes down to inspect the shoes in question. His cheeks have turned the loveliest rosy shade, and Dazai could look at it for hours on end without getting bored. He won’t allow himself to get distracted by the wondrous ways in which Chuuya’s body reacts to words though; he needs to focus on the task at hand - getting Chuuya to knock over the vase (and, hopefully, his unnecessary defensiveness along with it).

“Just joking〜 your shoes are *the worst,*” Dazai sing-songs and then quickly ducks down to dodge the incoming kick from the left.

He straightens back up and turns to marvel at the scene playing out in front of him: Chuuya’s leg collides with the pedestal, sending vibrations up through the column until it reaches the top.

Dazai looks at Chuuya who’s looking alarmedly at the vase, which is slowly but surely tilting to the side, threatening to fall over any second.

Gravity wins (as Chuuya ought to know), and although it seems to be happening in slow motion, the vase does end up plummeting down - with direction straight towards the hard marble floor. Ready to crash. To fall into pieces. To disintegrate.

Dazai rubs his hands together in anticipation.

Chuuya hurls forward with considerable momentum, throws himself on the floor and reaches out to touch the vase just a second before it comes crashing down to the ground.

The red light of *For The Tainted Sorrow* flashes and the vase becomes engulfed by Chuuya’s gravity. He uses his ability to direct the vase back on top of the pedestal in one piece, then turns to look at Dazai with disapproval in his eyes.

“You know what? It’s a good thing that I didn't even *intend* to hit you with that kick. If I’d put any kind of force or effort into it, my leg would have blasted right through the column-thing.”

“Wow, cool. Chuuya is so strong,” Dazai teases.

“And you’re so, *so* annoying. You totally planned for it, didn’t you? You wanted me to knock it over.”

“Obviously!” Dazai sasses with an impish grin covering his face, “that vase is an ostentatious piece of trash. It was made to be broken.”

“Hah, figures that someone like you would think that.”

Dazai is not supposed to react to those kinds of jabs, but there’s a strange chill tingling down his back, nonetheless. Like a sponge that’s taking up too much water, cold drops dripping from it and forming a puddle around his feet.

It’s not a feeling Dazai can pinpoint with any accuracy, but it’s not a good one - he’s able to say that much.

“What is that supposed to mean?” he questions, keeping his expression blank.

Chuuya doesn’t waver, doesn’t break eye contact, but also doesn't say anything. He’s a tough nut to crack, but Dazai still sees it in those blue eyes: *regret*.

Chuuya is not the first to imply that there’s an ugly and unwholesome aura to Dazai’s existence, but Chuuya *is* the first to think he has overstepped a line by doing it.

Dazai realises that it’s messed up, but he can’t fight the ugly, greedy beast inside of him that wants to force more reactions from Chuuya; wants to dig his fingers in and twist. To take the regret and set it on fire until they both burn with it.

He fixes Chuuya with a pointed glare. “Actually, I think you’re right. I’m probably just projecting.”

Chuuya’s jaw drops. He’s clearly surprised that Dazai would admit such a thing out loud.

Dazai enjoys the shocked look on Chuuya's face, but he enjoys how those blue eyes burn with hundreds of conflicting emotions, even more.

Chuuya reaches out a hand, grasps the sleeve of Dazai’s mafia-black trenchcoat and tugs lightly. “Hey?”

Dazai lowers his head and peeks through his lashes. He knows exactly what he wants Chuuya to say, but he doesn’t quite dare to hope for it.

“What?” he says in an even, almost bored tone that is designed specifically to disguise his eager curiosity.

“Ever heard of Kintsugi?”

“No, what is it?”

Chuuya stalls, for a moment then stammers: “It’s… um. Well, technically it’s a type of pottery art… and, um...”

Dazai deflates. He absolutely doesn’t care for an infodump on pottery.

He knows it’s backwards, but what he wants is to be rewarded for playing up his own biggest flaw; for Chuuya to muffle the problem by downplaying it - maybe even by saying something so wonderfully unrealistic as *'no, you’re not broken'*.

Well, nothing’s ever really random, but humans are very complex, and although Dazai is very good at predicting what they'll say, that doesn’t always correspond with what he *wants* them to say.

Chuuya looks like he’s fumbling for words but starts up again, “but the idea in kintsugi is to repa-”

“I don’t care, Chuuya. Why are you even talking to me about this?” Dazai holds a hand up to signal that he doesn’t want to hear whatever tangent Chuuya is about to go off on.

Chuuya sighs. “I was trying to be nice, but nevermind,” he raises a hand to his face and rubs his forehead. “I’m sorry, okay?”

It floors Dazai how easily Chuuya hands out genuine apologies. That kind of thing doesn’t come naturally to Dazai, but he doesn’t want to be outdone at anything by anyone, so he reluctantly offers his own expression of regret:

“I guess I'm sorry too. I know how impatient Chuuya is,” he says, “If I'd known you missed me so desperately, I would have hurried much more.”

Chuuya raises an eyebrow. “You’re not going to apologize for shit-talking my style?”

Dazai shrugs and gives a playful wink, to which Chuuya rolls his eyes to the ceiling as if seeking advice from the spirits of artists who might be wandering around the museum - searching for help in dealing with Dazai’s presence.

“I’m starting to think you’re not even interested in helping with the case. You came here just to harass me, didn’t you?”

Dazai titters like he does when he’s accepting a compliment. “I had to come up with something special for a reunion so long in the making!”

“Ugh. We haven’t seen each other in 17 days. It’s not like it’s been 4 years!”

Dazai silently delights with the knowledge that Chuuya too has been counting the days. It’s oddly reassuring. “I missed you too,” he says.

Chuuya doesn’t outright blush this time, but there’s still the tiniest bit of colour left in his cheeks, and it seems to glow a little brighter.

He clears his throat and gives Dazai a serious look. “Don’t play cute with me, Mackerel.”

He points towards a narrow door that’s so well integrated with the wall, that it wouldn’t even be noticeable if it wasn’t for the ‘staff only’ sign above it. “You’re coming with me to the security room, I need you to touch something.”

“*Chuuya*,” Dazai gasps. “That’s so forward of you! At least… I don't know... buy me a cup of coffee from the cafeteria, or something, before asking me to touch your d-”

“*Shut up,*” Chuuya hisses and looks around as though to check if anyone is listening. There’s no one around, the room is closed for public entrance, and the police have given up on the case. Save from the paintings and other art objects (which, to be fair, do have a presence that evokes an eerie sense of being stared at) they're utterly alone.

“Someone has tampered with the security footage - it just loops the same 8-hour sequence. The police’s forensic IT specialist had a look at it and couldn’t diagnose the problem. There’s nothing wrong with either hardware or software, so we assume that it must be under the

influence of an ability.” Chuuya gestures vaguely towards Dazai, “which is why you’re here. I need you to nullify it so we can watch back the real footage.”

“I see. And then we’ll know who the thief is. Good thing I'm here, or we would never find out.”

“We actually already have a suspect.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, Ranpo is out of town, but we emailed him all the evidence we were able to gather. which isn’t much-”

“But he was still able to pinpoint who did it?”

“Well.. sort of? He says that there’s something fishy about this case - that it’s probably more complicated than it appears to be.”

Dazai interrupts by clapping his hands together with a loud smack. “How exciting!” he beams.

Chuuya's lips twist into something that's half a smile, half a sneer. "It's not *exciting*. A famous painting has gone missing - it's kind of... unfortunate."

To Dazai’s ears, Chuuya’s attempt to cling to a facade of maturity and reason sounds rather childish. "Sure, it’s unfortunate that you won’t admit how amped up you are about this," he mocks, knowing damn well that Chuuya enjoys a hard case as much as the next detective.

“*Anyway,*" Chuuya grunts while fidgeting with the zipper of his jacket. "Ranpo says that the security guard on duty last night is involved, so, for the time being, he is our main suspect.”

Chuuya reaches into the breast pocket in his ghastly red bomber jacket and pulls out some paper that’s folded twice across the middle (but not very symmetrically).

“Here, have a look at his file.”

Dazai takes the paper, unfolds it and quickly glimpses through it. Nothing special jumps out. There's a name in the upper left corner: Kaneko Yuuto, and a picture on the right: round cheeks, soft features, thin lips, very light brown, almost amber eyes that contrast nicely with his dark brown hair. He's 26 years old and has been working for the Mori Art Museum as a security guard and operator for almost a year. He is single, lives alone and hasn’t had a single sick day since he started the job. No mention of an ability.

“So… we know that someone with an ability has tinkered with the security system, but the prime suspect isn’t a registered ability user?” Dazai comments.

Chuuya nods. “Which means that either he has a secret ability or an accomplice.”

“Hmm. And what do we know about the nature of this ability?”

“Not much. It changed the CCTV footage without there being any traces of technical alterations to any of the screens, files or cameras.”

“Interesting. And Kaneko?

“Has gone missing along with the painting.”

Dazai hums. “Kunikida-san and Atsushi-kun are on the case, right?”

“How’d you know that?”

“One of my subordinates has been spying on them,” Dazai answers.

Chuuya’s upper lip curls. “That’s creepy.”

“That’s what I told him!” Dazai grins, “but let’s not talk about my hopeless underling. I have a question for you, Chu-chu.” He cocks his head coquettishly to the side and holds Chuuya’s gaze a little longer than what common social norm deems appropriate. “Your colleagues are out on a manhunt, and they left you with the boring job of checking out the crime scene?”

“What about it?” Chuuya says, and something in his tone suggests that he’s aiming for aloofness; a clear sign that he is hiding something.

Dazai shrugs. “Nothing, it’s just an interesting priority, isn’t it? Who decided that it was a good idea to let the strongest ability user, with the greatest passion for action, do the boring detective work?”

“It’s not boring,” Chuuya retorts. This time, with a clear defensive edge to his voice. “There’s plenty of work to do here.”

“Oh really, what exactly? Besides waiting for me to arrive and nullify the effect of the ability that’s being used on the security system… which is pretty boring, cause that’s probably just going to confirm what you already know - that Kaneko Yuuto stole the painting.”

“Well, as a detective, I happen to think that it’s important to have definite evidence.”

“And I happen to think you just wanted to spend some alone time with me,” Dazai chippers, the words delivered with just enough self-assured breeziness to teeter on the border between being a serious statement and a joke.

Chuuya’s posture stiffens. “What on earth are you talking about?”

There’s an openly dubious look on his face that makes a laugh bubble in Dazai's throat.

“Yes, what could I possibly be talking about?”

Dazai narrows his eyes and taps a finger against his lips. “You *knew* I was going to have to come here and nullify the ability that's messing up the CCTV footage, so you asked if you could do the investigation at the museum. Am I wrong?”

Chuuya swallows hard, then shrugs in that way he does when he doesn't want to concede, but also doesn't want to lie, and Dazai delights in being right. “I’m flattered.” he purrs and without waiting for Chuuya to respond, he strides, with fluid grace, across the room toward the almost hidden door in the wall, which supposedly leads to the security rooms.

Dazai fishes around for the all-access ID badge that he knows is in his pocket *somewhere* - he just has a very hard time finding it.

Chuuya reaches a hand forward, and it looks like he is going in for a hug, which Dazai has about a million conflicting emotions about: he usually isn't a big fan of people hugging him, but there are exceptions to that rule. Chuuya *is* one of them, but it’s just so unexpected, and there’s a certain sense of unease associated with the foreign feeling of not understanding what’s going on.

“What are you d-”

“You’re looking for your ID, aren’t you?” Chuuya asks. There’s a gleam in his blue eyes and a faint curve to his lips like he knows something but chooses to stay silent. He plucks the badge from Dazai’s chest pocket and holds it up like it’s a medal. “Ta-da” he cheers.

Dazai’s heart beats in a funny staccato rhythm that he struggles to force back to something resembling a more normal pattern.

“Oh. That’s where I… um... put it,” he croaks, the words tumbling out of his mouth in a slow and jumbled way.

Chuuya waves the badge in front of Dazai’s nose with a self-satisfied grin on his face. “What’s that? Can't find your way around your own pockets?”

Dazai clears his throat and snatches back his ID, before waving it at the scanner by the door.

The door swings open with a slight creaking sound that’s hard to place, neither innocent nor ominous.

They step through and enter a long tunnel-like corridor.

The surrounding walls are blindingly - uncomfortably - white, and Dazai has the fleeting thought that a space so empty, with walls so bare, shouldn’t exist in a museum - even if it’s a ‘staff only’ area. The lack of colourful paintings, sculptures, art installations or *something* is making him slightly uncomfortable. Almost, Like he’s overstepping a boundary; like the hallway’s nakedness isn’t supposed to be seen.

There aren’t any windows - only harsh overhead spots illuminate their path. The lack of natural lighting is just a little smothering and Dazai has to remind himself for the second time that day, that he doesn’t have claustrophobia. Which is fortunate, cause if he did, he’d be very on edge.

The rushing in his ears and his sweaty palms have to be the byproduct of low blood sugar - there’s a rational explanation for everything.

He lowers his gaze, and as they make their way forward, he stays closer to Chuuya than he normally would.

Chuuya shoots glances in Dazai's direction, and they're borderline concerned-looking. "You're looking a little pale. Everything alright?"

"Splendid," Dazai replies but he can hardly hear his own voice through the horrid tinnitus, which roars like an angry ocean inside his cranium.

Chuuya exhales sharply through his nose, a puff of air that says *'I don't believe you'*. Luckily though, he doesn't press the issue further and although he looks surprised, He also doesn't comment on it, when Dazai sways a little closer to him so they're practically walking shoulder to shoulder.

They proceed in silence, that's only broken by the clacking of their footsteps on the hard floor - a kind of quiet understanding that speaks of things that can't be articulated.

Yes, there's particular pleasure in keeping silent.

Chapter End Notes

Chuuya is wearing the outfit from the first sunrise art :) (if you haven't seen it, there's a link here: http://bungo-stray-dogs.jp/news/?news=collabo-maruishop)

I apologise for any typos or grammar hiccups. This is unbetaed and although I've tried my very best to get it to be perfect, I might have missed something. I hope it was okay.

Thank you so much for reading- see you next week :)

I love kudos and comments ♡♡♡♡♡

3. The mystery man that's been unmasked

Chapter Summary

Chuuya and Dazai are two blushy lovebirds, and Kunikida has terrible timing.

Very plotty. Very fluffy.

Chapter Notes

Hi there!
It’s unsettling times, and I hope you’re all okay and of good health.
I hope that you’ll enjoy this chapter, that it will make you smile a little, and offer a little distraction from everything that’s happening right now.
I won’t make this note too long, but let me just say that I’m absolutely overwhelmed with gratitude at the love I’ve received for the first 2 chapters (thank you so much to everyone who’s been reading and leaving kudos/comments - especially Ura, you’re keeping me alive with your comments♡)
Stay safe friends ♡
Enjoy ♡♡♡

_____

Chapter notes:
- Chapter warnings: Very quick mention of drugs and torture.
- Chapter title from The Bourne Identity by The Last Shadow Puppets.
- 8 is considered a lucky number in Japan
- Omamori: Japanese amulets said to provide various forms of luck or protection.
- I’ve aged Chuuya and Dazai down (to 20), so that’s why they refer to Kunikida as Kunikida-SAN rather than Kunikida-kun. I don’t know, I just really love the idea of Kunikida being the senpai who gets to order ADA Chuuya around (≧◡≦)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They round a corner and pass through automated double doors, which take them to the building's security department; a less confined space, with actual windows that allow for the illusion of having an escape route (although, of course, jumping out the window from the 52nd floor isn’t a viable escape option as much as it’s a deathwish).

Chuuya leads the way through the main security control area to the office that is assigned to the monitoring of the museum's CCTV system.

There's police tape stretched across the door along with a note of 'do not enter', which Chuuya blatantly ignores as he goes straight for the handle.

He rips open the door with a force that speaks of hurriedness, but then, instead of storming into the room, he steps to the side holding the door open for Dazai to enter first.

"Ladies first?" Dazai asks around a bashful smile, laughter simmering just below the surface at Chuuya's unusual chivalry.

"Was just trying to be polite, but I can tone it down if you can't handle it."

"Oh no-no, don't stop on my account," Dazai says and bites the edge of his still-present smile as he peers around the room.

It is completely empty save for a console desk, two mismatching chairs and several wall-mounted monitor screens that decorate the room like a mural, bathing everything in an almost festive high-resolution glow of CCTV footage from every corner of the museum.

It is an unexpectedly small space, given its supposedly important function, and Dazai quickly forms the impression that the overseeing which usually takes place in the office is of a rather passive kind.

Dazai's eyes scan over the monitors, taking notice of the time and date stamps, which attest that they're watching the footage from last night - *the night of the crime*. Kaneko Yuuto is there, walking back and forth in a slow and even pace that's very fitting for a security guard; timed, controlled, rehearsed. He's looking all-around remarkably unsuspicious.

Chuuya walks up to the more uncomfortable looking of the two chairs and then flops into it with a heavy sounding *whump*. He's undoubtedly using his ability to make himself a lot heavier than he actually is, but Dazai doesn't think it's done on purpose. Rather, he suspects that it's an unconscious mechanism that kicks in when Chuuya is stressed - something he does in an attempt to ground himself.

Dazai pulls up the other chair -an annoyingly squeaky swivel chair - but when he sits down, it's with an unbearable lightness that tucks a bit at something inside of him.

It's times like these Dazai envies Chuuya for his ability.

"So," Chuuya sighs, "whatever this mysterious ability is, it has looped the same 8-hour sequence onto the screens, completely bypassing what the actual surveillance cameras are picking up."

"Intriguing," Dazai comments.

"Annoying," Chuuya counters, and then adds: "The recording begins last night at 10 pm and runs through till 6 am. Then it starts over again."

"Let me have a look," Dazai replies as he reaches for the computer mouse, hovering the scroller over the fast forward option.

They watch the footage sped up, so the timer in the lower-left corner of the screen moves at meteoric speed, hours flying by in seconds, uneventful high-resolution footage turning into a bland blur of colours. No sign of Kaneko doing anything but walk around in a precise, repetitive pattern, and no sign of the painting going missing - it hangs right in its place the entire time.

True to Chuuya's word, the video starts replaying again from the start, when the timer reaches 6 am.

"Have you had enough of a look now?" Chuuya asks, looking at Dazai out of the corner of his eye.

Dazai hums. "Yup. Now, let's see if I can perform a miracle with a single touch of my finger."

He gets up from his chair and dances around the room to tap each of the large monitor screens lightly with a finger. A series of bright blue light-beams emanate from each point of contact, *No Longer Human* freeing the monitors from whichever ability they're influenced by so that they once again can display the video feed from the surveillance cameras in real-time.

"Voilà," he chirps, beaming with all the self-satisfaction of a magician who has just performed a particularly boggling card trick.

The look on Chuuya's face is a cross between surprise and fascination. Dazai thinks it's a good look on him and can hardly resist the temptation to reach out and touch it, if not physically then with words.

"Why do you look like you thought it wouldn't work, Chu-chu?"

Chuuya blinks rapidly, as though he's slowly being pulled forcibly out of a dream.

"I don't know…. I mean, I did expect it to work. I wouldn't have dragged you in here if I didn't. It's just..."

"It's just?" Dazai prompts.

"Beautiful," Chuuya murmurs as he shifts nervously like he can't quite make himself comfortable in a space where such sappy things can be said out loud.

"My ability is… beautiful?" Dazai questions, hopeful astonishment warring with scepticism in his tone.

"Yes, of course, it is. Come on, don't act like you don't know. It fucking glows, and it lights everything up in shades of blue and it's-" Chuuya catches Dazai's eyes, and he must find genuine bewilderment in them cause he breaks off with a shake of his head, which Dazai wants to label as fond. "You really didn't know?"

"I… no? But thanks?" Dazai doesn't exactly see it as a compliment, but he is pretty sure Chuuya meant it as such. "You're... I mean your ability is also… um..."

“You don’t have to say anything, just take the compliment.” Chuuya laughs, and the sound is like a fire in the sunset, igniting little sparks of warmth and wonder.

He makes it sound so pure and simple, but that doesn’t help Dazai overcome the enormous hurdle, that is his complete inability to accept anything on such flimsy terms. He knows better - knows that few things in life are pure and nothing is ever simple. And while he doesn't consider himself an emotionally complex person who would need to feel any particular way about the compliment, he is, without a doubt, the kind of person who needs to take things apart to understand them.

“I can’t just take it,” he insists, “I need to *understand*. Explain it to me.” He tries not to think too hard about how self-obsessed it makes him sound, to ask for what is essentially an elaborate compliment with extra features.

Chuuya scratches the back of his head. “I’m afraid there’s no clear explanation.”

“Then I’ll take the unclear explanation. I don’t care if it’s a bit murky, as long as it’s there,” Dazai retorts. “Please, Chuuya,” he adds for good measure, biting his lip and lowering his gaze. (There’s just about nothing he can’t get with downcast eyes and bitten lips.)

Chuuya emits a puff of air from his lips. “I don't know… I’ve seen you use your ability many times before, so… maybe it’s because we’re in a museum? Maybe that has put me in the kind of headspace where I can,” he waves his hand around as though it helps him find the word he’s looking for, “where I can... appreciate beauty, I guess?”

“Oh,” Dazai says, and he has to concentrate more than he should, to keep his breath from shaking on the exhale. When he locks eyes with Chuuya, it feels disturbingly meaningful - his head empties in a way it never does (usually it on the brim of overflowing with thoughts), and for a moment, he exists only in the fascinating context of wanting to learn more about what it means to ‘appreciate beauty’.

Chuuya is the first to look away.

He clears his throat a couple of times before talking again. “Maybe I was just a bit confused," he says, voice sounding thick, "who says that it’s the monitors that the ability worked on? Couldn’t it have been the computers or the files or…?”

Dazai takes a couple of seconds to process the change of subject, but rapidly recovers and bounces right back into his carefree persona.

“A-ha, good thought, detective! So astute〜" he cheers. "It actually isn’t the screens, I mean it is, but there’s more to it than that.”

Blue eyes focus on Dazai with intense disbelief. "What do you mean? I just saw your ability going all glowy when you touched them.”

“We’re dealing with an interesting ability - it’s definitely not just for tinkering with technical gear, monitor displays and the like. It's more generalised than that - it can alter the appearance of things. I felt it when it touched the screens.

“Wait a second. What do you mean, you felt it? What are you? Some kind of psychic medium?”

“Not quite, but if that’s what you wanna call it then-”

“Come on, don’t give me that woo-woo. You’re a nullifier, not a mentalist.”

Dazai levels Chuuya with a look, “it’s not woo-woo, you dum-dum. I *can* sense the abilities I touch.”

“For real?”

“Yes.”

Chuuya frowns, “but you never told me,” he says in a faltering tone, voice like wind-tossed waves.

It sounds like his feelings have been hurt and Dazai, who rarely feels strongly about anything, hates it immensely.

“It never came up in conversation. Didn’t think it was relevant,” he says, because defence is the best offence and Dazai has a compulsion to combat any suggestion that he could have done something wrong with vehement passive aggression.

“You didn’t think it was relevant to tell me that you can feel it every time you bring me out of corruption?” There isn’t a single trace of judgment in Chuuya’s voice, but Dazai still feels those words prodding at something unpleasant inside of him. Like picking a scrap, slowly peeling off the dry edges.

“Didn’t wanna make you uncomfortable,” he confesses. It’s the truth, but it’s also a lie by omission... which probably makes it a half-truth (the whole truth is a lot more complicated; neither pure nor simple).

Chuuya’s eyes narrow to crinkled slits, suggesting that he has caught on to - and focuses his attention on - the part of the statement that's a lie.

He lets out a controlled blow of air. “I don’t understand why you have to keep me at arm’s length. Would it kill you to tell me something about yourself?”

Chuuya’s tone is demanding, but sincere rather than accusatory, and Dazai doesn’t appreciate it all. He doesn’t know how to negotiate in this type of conversation, and it’s making him feel jittery. Still, he resolutely suppresses the urge to bounce in the chair to try and shake off his inner restlessness.

“If I had known it was such a big deal to you, I would have told you.” Once again it’s the truth, but he makes sure to package it as nothing more, than an off-hand remark. Sensitive information should never be divulged with any kind of earnestness.

Chuuya crosses his arms in front of his chest.

“*Fine*,” he says in a sharp tone that cuts right through Dazai’s act. And no, It isn’t fine at all. It’s confusing, cause there’s also a hint of a smile on Chuuya’s lips like his frustration is coloured by something much more pleasant and patient - Dazai isn’t used to people.

being patient with him (unless it’s the fake kind of patience which is nothing more than a mask of agreeable civility).

But Chuuya is so very different - there’s absolutely nothing fake about him.

Dazai fixes his sleeves although they don’t need any fixing. “So… you’re not mad at me?” he asks. He doesn’t know why it’s important, but something about the idea of Chuuya being mad at him sits sourly at the back of his throat.

“No, I'm not, I just… whatever. It’s not important right now, we’re in the middle of a case, so it’s not the time to discuss personal matters.” He runs a hand through his hair before switching tracks. “So… we’re dealing with an illusion ability.”

Dazai sighs with relief, very content to talk about something, *anything*, else than ‘personal matters’.

“Of sorts, yes, although... I don't think it can create elaborate illusions. It's more particular than that, more like an appearance-altering ability.”

He rubs his pointer finger against his thumb, reimagining the feel of the ability he just came in contact with. “This is a touch-based ability, which means that whoever did it must have had access to this room. At some point before the robbery, probably around 10 pm where the recording starts, they touched the screens and set it to project the same looped video.”

“A-ha, that’s a good piece of information right there! We’ll hunt down everyone with access to this room,” Chuuya announces with all that buoyant bravado which comes so easily to him.

“No, that won’t help us much,” Dazai says, feeling mildly guilty about breaking the good mood. “If I'm right about this ability - and I'm usually right - it means that our culprit can alter their own appearance too.”

“Ugh.” Chuuya deflates visibly but quickly regains his composure; as fast to find his emotional equilibrium as he is to sway away from it. “Moving on then," he says, "why don’t we have a look at the real footage from last night?” He cocks his head to look at Dazai with his distractingly bright eyes.

Dazai nods and lets his fingers fly over the keyboard, opening and closing windows at lightning speed until he’s found the folder that contains the recordings from the night before. He clicks, and the video feed starts rolling.

Kaneko’s figure is projected on the display monitors once again; captured from all different angles by the surveillance cameras in the Hokusai exhibition room.

Dazai promptly ducks forward and presses the pause button on the computer.

His hands flash over the keyboard for a few seconds, causing small windows to pop up on the screen in front of him. Then a front-facing still image of Kaneko's face is on-screen. A couple of finger taps and it jumps in size; first to fill the entire screen, then twice as large again.

Dazai lets out a thoughtful hum as he steeples his fingers under his chin.

"What's going on? What are we looking at?" Chuuya asks.

"A beautiful face."

"Yeah well, I've actually had enough of looking at his face. Do you mind starting up the video again?"

"But look at his eyes, Chuuya!"

Chuuya gives a deadpan look, "Yes, I see them."

Dazai nods a single time and closes down the window with the zoomed-in version of Kaneko's face. He starts up the video again, playing it in fast-forward mode, so they're watching it at 10 times the normal speed.

The first several hours of the recording flies by in a minute, and it corresponds more or less exactly to the looped version they'd just watched. It makes for a decidedly uneventful viewer-experience.

When the timer reaches 1 am, suspicious activity starts to occur: Kaneko slides in pieces of cardboard over the small motion detectors above and below the painting's frame and fastens them with tape.

"Ah!" Dazai exclaims, "I noticed that down in the exhibition room, I like that he's using old school methods. I respect that! Can't go wrong with tried-and-tested tricks." He adjusts the time setting, slowing the video down to normal speed.

Chuuya presses his lips into a thin line. "You're complimenting a thief," he grouches, and the look in his eyes borders on outraged, which amuses Dazai endlessly.

"So? It's a thief who knows what he's doing. Gotta give credit where credit is due."

Chuuya just shakes his head and goes back to watching the footage with aggressive intensity. There's something very sweet about how he glues his eyes to the screen in an ardent effort to avoid looking in Dazai's direction.

On the screen, Kaneko walks up to The Great Wave. He dismounts the painting with ease, wraps it in a large piece of cloth, and then puts it in a tote bag. He swings the bag over his left shoulder and then walks off with the famous masterpiece, carrying himself with the un-suspiciousness of a Sunday-shopping civilian, who's returning from an organic farmers market carrying a bag full of vegetables.

Like he hasn't got anything to be ashamed of.

Kaneko evades the other security guards in the corridors and adjoining galleries with an efficiency that speaks of both skill and practice - he is clearly a professional.

He slides into an elevator and rides it down to the garage reserved for employees, commercial vehicles and stock delivery.

He deposits the painting in the trunk of a small white car, that's so rusty and battered that it somehow strikes a chord with Dazai. Maybe he shouldn't sympathise with inanimate objects, but he gets the sense that the car understands the pain of living better than most living things.

"What a miserable car; looks like it longs to be saved from the oxidizing effect of this world," he mumbles, rocking slightly from side to side in his chair.

Chuuya snorts. "I don't know about that. Look at its license plate - it's one long lucky number."

Dazai scans his eyes over the license plate. It's red striped, which means that it's a temporary plate, and sure enough, the registration number is 88 88 888. He lets out a low whistle of admiration.

Chuuya nods in agreement. "I know right, what are the odds?"

"Well, by the law of probability, that sequence actually has as great a chance of occurring as any other of the possible number combinations, which is ten to the seventh. Or, to answer your question: the odds are one in ten million."

"Show off," Chuuya huffs, but there's a smile toying on his lips that Dazai wants to keep like a little bird that will sing forever in his garden. But he can't say that, and he doesn't even have a garden, so instead, he shrugs, "you asked, and I answered."

"Yeah, yeah. It was a rhetorical question, smartass. Now, roll the video again."

Dazai hits play, but when he notices a pendant of some sort hanging by a delicate thread from the car's rearview mirror, he quickly clicks pause.

He zooms in on the image to study it further. On closer inspection, it appears to be some sort of omamori. It's made of black and blue brocaded silk and bears the image of something long and narrow, which could be an arrow, but the resolution of the image isn't quite high enough to tell with any degree of certainty.

"... success," Chuuya half-whispers under his breath. Despite being spoken so softly, the word pulls Dazai out of his focus rather abruptly.

He gives Chuuya an openly perplexed look. "Succes?"

Chuuya motions towards the image on the screen, "That's a katsumori. It's a type of omamori that's supposed to guarantee success if you channel your energy on a single goal."

"Sooo much superstition in this world," Dazai remarks with a derisory wrinkle of his nose. He zooms the image back out, so the whole car is in front-facing view again.

Chuuya hums in half-hearted agreement, “you don’t believe in anything you don’t understand, do you?”

“Of course I do. I don’t understand why Chuuya always wears such hideous clothes, but it’s just a fact- so I'll have to accept it.” Dazai says, a teasing grin tugging at his features.

Chuuya looks like he has just eaten something incredibly bitter, “Ugh, you just have to bring your deeply irrational dislike of my style up every chance you get, don’t you? I swear I've met five-year-olds who are more mature than you.”

"I'm not irrational," Dazai counters and sticks his tongue out, in answer to which Chuuya rolls his eyes. “Anyway,” he says, as he gets his phone out of his pocket and snaps a picture of the car, “the license plate is probably a fake, but just to be on the safe side, I'll send a pic over to Kunikida-san. He has an incredibly tech-savvy friend, who'll find the car if it's registered in any database."

Dazai drums his fingers on the desk while waiting for Chuuya to finish taking the pictures, “sure, it’s good to be thorough, but I highly doubt Mr Ideals’ friend will find anything on that car.”

Chuuya nods with pursed lips but doesn't otherwise comment before he reaches forward, grabs the mouse and clicks the play icon firmly. The video starts up again, and they watch as the thief retrieves a dark blue jacket from the back of the trunk. The jacket is rather expensive looking, not a brand or model that Dazai recognises, but the design and tailoring speak of high quality.

As the thief pulls the jacket over his shoulders, something small falls out from the left pocket and lands solidly on the concrete ground. There’s an air of finality to the way in which the small unidentified object touches down - no bouncing or rolling around.

Dazai tries to zoom in on it, but it’s too small and non-distinct in shape for him to determine what it is.

“We should go down into the garage and check that out once we’re done here,” he comments and then resets the zoom level. His eyes catch on the fanciful jacket once more. “Actually, could you take a picture of that jacket, too?”

“Why?” Chuuya asks but raises his phone to take a picture, obliging without objecting or waiting for an explanation.

“It’s a nice jacket. Unlike yours,” Dazai answers, shooting a taunting side-eye in the direction of Chuuya’s red bomber jacket.

Chuuya huffs quietly, leans forward to place his elbows on the console and drops his chin into his hands.

“Whatever,” he breathes out, sounding more exasperated than perturbed - not exactly like he's at the end of his rope, but close enough; maybe like he considers using that rope to tie Dazai to the squeaky swivel chair. “Just start up the video, again. We don’t have all day.”

The thief gets into the driver's seat and takes off. The last thing the CCTV captures is the parking barrier-gate opening and the rusty white car driving through.

“Well, that was informative,” Dazai says.

“Not really. It didn’t give us any leads.”

“I’m sure we'll get one soon enough, and at least we now know that our culprit was working alone, so we won’t have to waste time hunting down an accomplice too.”

Chuuya head snaps to the side, looking directly at Dazai with bug-eyed confusion, “and how do we know that?” he questions.

“Because he - and I’m assuming it’s a he based on body language and posture, but I could be wrong - is the one with the illusion ability, and he has been using it both to change the image on the screens in here,” Dazai gestures vaguely to glowy display monitors that surround them. "and to change his appearance to look like Kaneko Yuuto."

“Wait a second. Are you saying that the Kaneko we just watched steal the painting isn't the real Kaneko?"

"Duh? Haven't you been paying attention?"

"So… that means... Kaneko Yuuto… isn’t actually Kaneko Yuuto?”

Dazai shakes his head. “Kaneko Yuuto is who he is and looks like the spitting image of himself, but the art thief isn’t Kaneko Yuuto. It’s an impersonator.”

“Right," Chuuya says, sounding like he doesn't know what is right and what is wrong anymore.

“Which of course has me quite curious about the real Kaneko’s whereabouts,” Dazai remarks.

Chuuya’s eyes widen, a blue sea of concern. “Wait, do you think he’s-”

“No, I don't think he’s dead. The impersonator didn't need to kill him to press him for some information and steal his uniform, so most likely he’s just drugged and chained to his bed.”

“Just?”

Dazai shrugs. “Worse things could happen. Maybe he doesn’t even mind; a lot of people are into that kinda thing.” He winks at Chuuya, who gawks back at him with an owlish expression, “but why don’t you call your colleague and ask if they had any luck finding him?”

“Yeah okay,” Chuuya says as he fumbles for his phone. “Wait... how do you know it’s an impersonator?”

“Because of his eyes! I showed you, don’t you remember?”

Chuuya puts down his phone on the table. “No, I don't understand. What are you on about?” he replies, tilting his head to the side.

Dazai scrolls through the surveillance footage until he finds a good, clear image of the alleged impersonator, zooms in, and points to it with an accusing finger. “Look! dark, almost black eyes.” He fishes out the folded up paper - Kaneko Yuuto’s profile - that he still has in his pocket and smooths it out on the table. He gestures to the picture in the upper left corner. “But in this picture, he has light brown eyes.”

“Oh.” Chuuya frowns as he looks back and forth at the two images. “But… couldn’t it just be the lighting, or... I don’t know? he could be wearing contact lenses?”

“The change in colour is too big to be caused just by variations in lighting, and I don’t see why he would be wearing coloured lenses in either the ID picture or when on duty.”

“Well, why would he forget to change his eye colour when he used his creepy shape-shifting ability to change his appearance to look like Kaneko?”

Dazai raises an eyebrow. “You expect an ability user to always have complete control over their ability?” He says it as softly as he can because although he doesn’t intend for it to be a jab at Chuuya and his futile efforts to gain complete control over Arahabaki, it feels a bit like it is.

Chuuya purses his lips, “When you put it like that… still, though, why would he get something as basic as eye colour wrong?”

Dazai holds a hand up. “Look, I get what you’re saying, for someone skilled enough to pull off an art heist so effortlessly, a certain level of overall proficiency would be expected."

"That's what I'm saying."

"But I don't think it’s just a matter of forgetting or a lack of ability-control; I think it's his unconscious attempt to maintain a sense of personal identity even when he masquerades as someone else.”

Dazai takes a deep breath and braves himself for the words that are about to spill from his lips. “All ability users are a little afraid of losing themselves to their ability, aren’t they?”

The question is phrased in general terms, but it’s very obviously a type of personal disclosure.

Dazai doesn’t usually share his struggles so generously. The fact that *No Longer Human* is always gnawing at him isn’t something he lets on too much. Anyone who’s ever been near him can tell that *something* bothers him, but Dazai doesn't even know if the idle restlessness that follows him like a curse is caused by his ability or something else entirely, and things that can’t be known can’t be spoken about - at least not in terms that Dazai knows how to articulate.

Luckily, he doesn't have to say it directly for the meaning to get across; Chuuya is quite astute at reading between the lines.

Chuuya reaches out as if to pat Dazai's shoulder but then seems to change his mind, stops midair and drops his hand on the table. Maybe it's another testament to his ability to pick up on all the small things which hang in the air like an invisible field; discernible only for those who know what to look for - such as Dazai's dislike of sudden, unexpected, light touch.

So, Chuuya politely keeps his hands to himself. Instead, he searches out Dazai's eyes, and Dazai allows it cause he likes Chuuya's eyes a lot - they're vivid but never uncomfortable in their intensity.

The energy in the room shifts drastically, a palpable heat fills the space, making it feel like a warm summer day.

"Hey… thanks for telling me," Chuuya half-whispers, his voice molten caramel, sweet and tempting.

"I don't know what you think I'm telling you, but it's nothing to be grateful for."

Chuuya shakes his head, but quickly returns his gaze to Dazai, eyes drawn like a magnet to a pole.

"Sure it is, you dumb mackerel." There's heat flickering like a flame in his gaze. "And you make a good point. It's easy to get lost in… things."

"Mhmm… Chuuya sometimes makes good points too," Dazai says although he doesn't have the faintest idea why he's saying it or where he's going with it.

Maybe he should admit to being a little lost too?

Despite the unfamiliar uncertainty, he bravely holds Chuuya's gaze. It feels a bit like seeing into a mirror, except the reflection that looks back at him, isn't as unfamiliarly mysterious. No, he has a decent understanding of what's going on; Chuuya likes it when he tries (however miserable the attempts are) to be open and honest.

Chuuya leans a little closer and the hand that he previously dropped on the table, slowly creeps closer. Dazai can anticipate the contact it will make, awaits the impact eagerly, knowing that it will be perfect cause nothing about it is sudden, unexpected or light.

He knows how to read Chuuya. Knows where this is going. Knows what to expect. Knows how tight Chuuya hugs and how firm the press of his mouth is when he kisses.

17 days have passed since their first kiss, and Dazai doesn't want to wait another day before the second.

He bites his lower lip, and Chuuya chases the action with hooded eyes. He draws closer until their lips are only a hand's width apart, and reaches out as if he wants to grab Dazai's neck. His eyelashes flutter prettily like a butterfly basking in the very first sun rays of the morning, and his mouth is slightly parted - waiting, offering, asking.

Yes, Dazai knows exactly where this is going, can feel the quivering excitement in Chuuya like it's his own; heart like a drum roll and thunder coursing through his veins. An invisible force propels him into action, and he finds himself leaning forward to meet Chuuya halfway. So close.

Chuuya's phone lights up, vibrating and ringing vigorously, destroying the mood with an assertive snap - like a stretched rubber band being released.

Chuuya glares at the phone with pure venom but still drops the hand that's floating just centimetres from Dazai's cheek to reach for it.

Dazai instantly misses the contact that never even happened, and although he isn't superstitious in the least, there's a dreary sense of deja-vu to how those wretched phones keep interrupting him in the middle of things. There's also that tightness in his stomach again, that may or may not be disappointment.

Chuuya clears his throat a couple of times before accepting the call.

"Hello... Kunikida-san?" His voice sounds pinched like it is being squeezed through a straw.

There's some indistinct noise coming from the phone that's pressed against Chuuya's ear, and Dazai can't parse it out as speech, but the voice that's producing it is both more boisterous and more strident than it strictly needs to be (which shouldn't be surprising since Kunikida, at least in Dazai's experience, seems like the kind of guy who can't even talk about the weather without yelling).

Chuuya bravely accepts the tsunami of words that his superior pours on him, without interrupting - merely pinching the bridge of his nose and squeezes his eyes shut.

As soon as the continuous noise becomes less pressured, seemingly decelerating and leaving some pauses, he jumps in. "Right, I understand," he says evenly, "But... we think it's the same person... I don't know… well, it's - I know. I KNOW! I'll explain…. Yes. Okay. Bye."

Chuuya ends the call and slumps back in his seat. He looks at Dazai, with tired eyes that suggest the just-ended phone conversation, drained him of all will to stay awake for the rest of the day.

Chuuya ends the call and slumps back in his seat. He looks at Dazai, with tired eyes which suggest that the just-ended phone conversation, drained him of all will to stay awake for the rest of the day.

Dazai finds himself twitching with the need to wipe the tired look off Chuuya's face: to smooth the tension from his brow -preferably by kissing him until all thought disappears from his worried head.

Unfortunately, the mood is so effectively ruined that Dazai doesn't dare attempt to restore it. He's not a big believer in fixing broken things, he'll rather wait for a new opportunity, and so, he opts for changing the subject.

“Did Kunikida-san call just to yell at you, or did he actually have something to say?” Dazai says in a light tone that he sincerely hopes lifts the mood and covers up any awkwardness that the almost-kiss may have caused.

“You were right,” Chuuya says as he turns his phone on silent mode (an action that Dazai really wants to analyse, but it will have to wait till later), and puts it back down on the table. “They found Kaneko Yutto in his apartment, knocked out by some ungodly combination of drugs and chained to a chair. They took him to the agency’s infirmary where Yosano-sensei is treating him. He is awake now, but she says that given the various substances in his system and their different half-lives, he must have been unconscious for at least 12 hours.”

“As predicted, then... I assume he doesn’t know anything helpful. They’d be chasing the impersonator down by now if he did,” Dazai says.

Chuuya nods. “Yeah. We’re regrouping at the agency, to discuss what we’re going to do from here.”

“I know where to go from here,” Dazai beams. “Ask Yosano-sensei to send us an exact list of the active agents and a summary of the particular drugs she suspects were combined,” he points to the jacket the impersonator on the screen wears. “And send her a picture of the jacket, too. Have her check with Kaneko if it’s his.”

Chuuya side-eyes Dazai like he wants to say something - possibly that he doesn't appreciate being told what to do but, in the end, he merely nods and types out a quick text message.

He looks up from his phone. “You realise how fucked we are, right? All we have to go on, right now, is a fake name and a fake face. It’s a bit like chasing a ghost.”

“Cool! That makes us ghost-hunters〜” Dazai beams with mirth, spinning around in his swivel chair while clapping his hands - excited like a kid on a carousel.

Chuuya lifts a leg and smacks his filthy boot against the armrest of Dazai’s chair to stop the spinning motion.

“Heeeey. What was that for?” Dazai asks petulantly. The sudden stop is making him nauseatingly dizzy. It's like his head is still spinning around although his body has come to a full stop. The world is rotating on its own axis at an alarming speed, and in front of him, Chuuya’s face is turning into a whirlpool of red and blue.

Before Chuuya can answer, his phone beeps with a message notification. “Right…” he murmurs as his eyes jump over the text message - or at least that’s what Dazai thinks is happening, but he can’t be sure cause visual reality is coming into focus again at a rather slow rate. “Right?” he inquires.

“Kaneko doesn’t recognise the jacket, so it must belong to the thief. Here’s the list you requested from Yosano-sensei.”

Chuuya hands the phone over to Dazai who, luckily, is able to combat the lightheadedness enough to scan the list for relevant information: There are of course the expected

incapacitating agents: sedatives and opioids but also barbiturates and interestingly mescaline and blue lotus.

Dazai grins. “Oh, I see! This is interesting and very convenient.”

Chuuya’s eyebrows draw together. “What are you talking about?”

“I could tell you, but you could also try to take a guess?”

Chuuya’s lips set in a grim line. “Will you stop being so childish?” he scoffs. “It’s not a fucking game. If you know something, tell me.”

Dazai pouts, his most endearing petulant look that no one can resist; yet Chuuya’s face stays put in a scowl which communicates that he somehow manages to resist it, successfully.

“Okay,” Dazai holds his hands up in a placating gesture. “Look, don’t you think it’s weird that an impersonator who’s supposedly not been using Kaneko’s identity up until yesterday, could navigate the museum so seamlessly. How did he find the way to the CCTV room? And how was he so familiar with the path and timing of the other security personnel that he could evade them so easily?”

Chuuya chews his lips, thoughtfully. “He could have gotten the information from Kaneko.”

“Yup, I think so too. Tell me Chuuya, did Kunikida-san mention anything about there being signs that Kaneko has been tortured?”

“No.”

“And that's because it would have been counterproductive for the thief to use pain or fear tactics on Kaneko - he needed a very clear and thorough description of how to find his way around in the museum."

"So?"

"The easiest way to get such a description would be to have Kaneko mentally walk him through the museum's layout and narrate all the steps - something that’s easier done in a relaxed state of mind," Dazai explains. "You see, it’s hard to get accurate, detailed information out of scared people. Fear produces all sorts of chemical reactions in the brain that are very bad for memory recall.”

“That’s some highly specific knowledge you got there, but I still don't see what it has to do with anything.”

“To put Kaneko into a semi-hypnotic state and have him describe how to get around in the museum, our culprit used drugs that heighten suggestibility.”

“Oh. That’s… again, highly specific. It almost sounds like you have personal experience with this technique.”

“I do it’s-”

“I don’t wanna know,” Chuuya interrupts.

“Why not? It's a good method. Often more efficient than torture... less messy too.”

Chuuya scrunches his nose but doesn’t say anything, so Dazai continues.

“It’s a clever approach, but it will be the thief's downfall. Although drugs aren't as specific as fingerprints, they’re also not as generic as some might think, and I happen to know the expert on these types of drugs - I bet she can tell me who sold those.”

Chuuya brightens visibly, the previous tiredness that sat around his face dissipates slowly like dew in the morning sun. “Well, what are you waiting for then? Call her.”

“Actually, I think I’ll pay her a personal visit after we’ve checked out the garage for evidence. There’s something else I need to discuss with her.”

Chapter End Notes

The line about ‘the little bird that will sing forever in his garden’. Is taken from The Happy Prince by Oscar Wilde. (If you haven’t read it, I highly recommend it. It’s so beautiful, but also heartbreakingly sad. So this is your warning: it will make you cry.)

Kudos are very appreciated, and I love hearing from you so please consider leaving a comment (or come talk to me on tumblr Tumblr)

4. Flowers that bloom in the dark

Chapter Summary

It turns out that the ability to take care of bonsai trees says a lot about a person's character…

Chapter Notes

Hello friends!
I hope you're all doing well and staying safe.
I'm kinda late with this update. (I've tried to stick to a weekly upload schedule and it's been ten whole days since the last chapter...)
Anyway, I hope you like long chapters cause this one is a bit of a beast.

Enjoy! and thank you so much for reading - it means the absolute world to me ♡♡♡♡♡

Chapter notes
Maneki-neko: a common Japanese figurine (lucky charm, talisman) which is often believed to bring good luck to the owner.
Ochaya: (お茶屋, literally "tea house") is an establishment where patrons are entertained by geisha.
Genkan: Where guests change out of dirty street shoes
Oiran: High-ranking professional entertainers. They are trained in various traditional Japanese arts, such as dance and music, as well as in the art of communication.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The staff elevator that takes them down to the garage is a whole lot smaller than the public one that Dazai used on his way up to the museum.

With its steely interior, it's a lot like a room of mirrors, and although Dazai tries to avert his gaze, he can't avoid catching a few glimpses of his own reflection. He looks pale and sleep-deprived in the artificial light that illuminates the cramped space.

On the bright side, though, it isn't loaded with heavy-perfume wearing people, packed like sardines in a can and breathing down his neck. The only other person in the stainless steel trap is Chuuya who doesn't smell like much of anything (except maybe faint notes of citrus and tobacco), and he keeps a polite distance, standing on Dazai's right side looking straight ahead at nothing.

Dazai shifts his weight from one foot to the other, a subtle pendulum-like swaying; right - closer towards Chuuya, and left - further away from Chuuya.

The elevator comes to a stop, and the doors open soundlessly, welcoming them into a big, gloomy underground garage that's cold, dark and smells like gasoline-soaked concrete.

Chuuya walks out first and marches briskly towards the parking spot, which - according to the CCTV footage - the rusty white car had been parked in.

Dazai catches up quickly, one long leg in front of the other, black shoes tapping at the space that separates them. "Hey Chuuya, let's play a game."

"No thanks," Chuuya says, voice echoing nicely in the cave-like garage, adding an omnipresent deep timbre to the words.

Dazai shivers in the cold air as he follows close behind Chuuya.

"Come ooooooon," he whines and pouts to the best of his ability. "You don't even know what game I was going to propose."

"I don't need to know the game to know I don't want to play."

"Ugh. You're so booooooooring."

There's a vein in Chuuya's forehead that's becoming more prominent by the second. "I'm trying to *focus*," he answers in a clipped tone while staring at the empty parking spot with an assessing glare. He bends down to all fours for a close-up investigation, not sparing Dazai a second look.

"Focus?" Dazai repeats, clapping his hands together with a loud smack. "Nice choice of word. Hmm… let's see. The opposite of focus is?"

Chuuya looks up from where he's scraping his knees along the hard concrete to search for evidence. His raised brow forms a question mark. "Um… what?"

Dazai grins. "This is my game! Naming opposites. I call it the game of antonyms."

"That sounds equal parts dumb and childish."

"Yeah well, that's me," Dazai admits because he's insightful like that.

Chuuya lets out a surprised laugh - a sweet sound that seems to raise the temperature in the cold dungeon of an underground garage.

Dazai feels his face stretch around a smile. "I promise it's a good game. It can be very poetic if you allow it to be."

Chuuya's head snaps up, and Dazai greets him with a conspiratorial grin - he knows how enamoured Chuuya is by poetry; has visited Chuuya's shabby little agency dorm room enough times to have noticed all the books that indicate a weakness for french symbolist

poetry. He has also seen the bonsai trees on the windowsills, which turn the little home into a miniature enchanted forest. And no, Dazai doesn't know much about bonsais, but he imagines that someone who has the patience to keep plants must be of a poetic disposition.

"Doesn't that sound right up your alley, Chuuya? Don't you wanna play?" he wheedles.

Chuuya narrows his eyes and purses his lips. He looks very unconvinced, like someone who is going to decline. There's a delicate pause - as fine as thinly woven silk, and then: "Okay. The game's on, Mackerel."

Dazai beams. "Yay. I'll pick the nouns, and you can tell me what you think?"

"Sure. Hit me."

"Hmm… let's see," he says, rubbing his chin in thought. "Car?"

"Flower," Chuuya answers without hesitation.

"Why?"

Chuuya lifts a shoulder in a half-shrug. "I'm not sure. You're the one who said it could be poetic. It's not accurate; it just *feels right*."

"I don't think I understand, but maybe if I can get a better understanding of your definition of 'feeling right'. What do you think the opposite of 'right' is?" he asks as he seeks aimlessly through the parking spot, quickly spotting two things of interest in the way of evidence: The little crumpled up dry thing that they'd seen come out of the culprit's jacket (which from a close-up view looks like some sort of dog-treat), and scattered around it, a few white hairs. He squats down to take a closer look.

Chuuya bends down next to Dazai. He looks pensive but in a distant way that suggests he's lost in thoughts rather than being invested in the evidence before his eyes.

"The opposite of right is…" he begins, but then breaks off with a sigh.

"Wrong?" Dazai suggests. He picks up a single white hair and runs it through his fingers to feel the texture - soft and thin, probably from a cat or a dog.

"NO! I know," Chuuya exclaims a lot louder than necessary given the short distance between them. "The opposite of right, of course, is *left*."

"Oh, that's real clever, detective," Dazai praises as he collects all the hairs from the ground. "Do you have one of those small zip lock bags, or something, to keep these in?"

"Sure, but what are we doing with it?" He sounds sceptical but still reaches a hand into a pocket, fumbles around for a second and then pulls out a small handful of miniature clear bags. "You know this doesn't count as evidence, right? We have no way of knowing if it's related to the Kaneko impersonator."

Dazai reaches forward and picks a bag out from the crumpled collection in Chuuya's hand.

“The security footage showed that no one parked in this spot after he left, but I suppose it could have been here beforehand. Maybe the director of this place has a Persian cat that he likes to bring to work, who knows. In any case, I was hoping you could take it with you back to the agency and have the weretiger sniff it, he has heightened senses, right?”

“I mean… yes, but-”

“Cool. so, he'll definitely be able to tell us what kind of animal we're dealing with. Last question for you. What is the opposite of ‘luck’?”

“My first thought was a Maneki-neko, so the opposite is… dog?”

Dazai picks up the small dog-treat looking thing and sniffs it, before reaching out to snatch another clear plastic bag from Chuuya’s grasp, and dumping it into the bag.

“Yes, I think so too… not one of those lovely Persian fluffballs then. What a shame. I'm not a dog person.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes. “This is a royal waste of time.”

“Not at all. We’re creating a profile of our prime suspect,” Dazai explains, stretching his arms out and creating a frame-like shape with his fingers. “And in conclusion, we’re looking for a superstitious, left-handed dog-owner.”

Chuuya lets out a puff of air through his nose. “Hold on,” he says, running a hand through his hair. “Even if we assume that there’s a dog and it belongs to the thief, then… wait. How do you know he’s superstitious and left-handed? Where did you get that from?”

“Mostly the surveillance footage, we just watched. The left-handedness was pretty clear throughout. Didn’t you notice? And then there was the omamori and the license plate. He’s *obviously* superstitious - probably used his ability to create that plate. I mean, you said it yourself: what are the odds of it turning out as one long, lucky number?”

“One in ten thousand, if I remember correctly,” Chuya replies flatly. “Not that it matters much, it’s just more drops in a sea of unusable evidence. We still don’t have any real leads."

“Yee of little faith. I’ll head out to do the drug investigation right away. I’m positive the expert I’m meeting up with will have something useful to say about the drugs we found in Kaneko’s system. Don’t you think we can combine all the evidence to narrow down our culprit's location?”

Chuuya looks like he wants to argue but doesn’t. “Where are you meeting your informant? Do you need a ride?” he asks instead.

“Ah yes, that would be lovely,” Dazai says as he stands up. “Thanks for offering, partner〜” Dazai makes his voice light. He isn’t quite laughing, but there’s still that little trill in his voice like he might start any minute.

Chuuya's eyes widen. "*Partner?* " he questions, the word repeated with equal parts amusement, wonder and disbelief.

Dazai turns his cheek and shrugs. "You don't like the idea of that? My bad." He spins around and starts walking towards the exit, not even bothering to look over his shoulder, to see if Chuuya is following along.

And he doesn't have to, because a second later Chuuya is right by his side, panting slightly from catching up despite being in superb physical shape. "It's not that. I just-"

"It's *fine,* Chuuya," Dazai assures, waving a hand dismissively. "You don't have to break up with me. It's not like we're dating."

Chuuya does that thing he does, sometimes, where he looks infuriated and delighted at once: fists tight and eyes narrowed, but with a glimmer of excitement and a smirk tucking at his lips.

"You wish, Mackerel."

Dazai shakes his head but doesn't suppress the laughter that spills from his lips as they walk side by side, and it echoes in the whole garage and all the way up through the stairwell that they climb to get to the ground level.

It's still drizzling as they filter through the crowded public square, making their way towards Chuuya's parked motorbike. Dazai observes the raindrops coming down from overhead, falling on the cap of Chuuya's tacky hat, and trickling off like tears.

It's wet and tactile in a way that makes Dazai want to collect every drop and keep it in a fishbowl. Maybe he'll get a Koi-fish and name it Rain - he'll remember to feed it every day, and it will keep him company in that pleasant way that fish do… being there without doing much or saying anything.

"Do you want pets, Chuuya?"

Chuuya side-eyes him. "Is this another one of your weird trick questions or games?"

"No. I was just wondering… I think I'd like a fish."

"I didn't ask, but okay. Give me the address and hop on the bike." Chuuya says.

"Just head towards Chinatown and I'll guide you from there," Dazai answers as he eyes the pink motorcycle. The rain is still way too gentle to be called a downpour, but it has managed to cover the seat in a sheet of water, a million little pearly raindrops clinging to the faux-leather.

"Maybe I should call for a car."

Chuuya laughs. "Boo-hoo. Are you *scared*."

No, Dazai doesn't know how to be scared. His brain simply doesn't label things as such. Neither the gory hideousness of the pink monstrosity nor the colourful intensity of Chuuya, who's the personification of fireworks, give rise to any fear.

If Dazai tries very hard to call on his powers of imagination, he can visualise an alternate universe out there where he is afraid of things. He can imagine being scared of fireworks. They're bright and explosive and vivid - the very antithesis to his own existence. He can't imagine a world in which he'd be scared of Chuuya though. Endlessly intrigued and drawn, yes, but not scared.

So Dazai finds himself shaking his head. "Not scared, just don't want to get a big wet spot on my ass," he says, eyes still fixed on the wet seat.

"No, we can't have that," Chuuya answers as he takes off a glove (very delicately. Pulling at one finger at the time. Dazai is mesmerized by the action.) and slaps the hand, in a far less delicate fashion, on the seat. The water takes on a red glow, and under the influence of his ability, Chuuya easily swipes it aside, leaving the seat dry and inviting. "There you go."

There's a helmet perched on the mirror stem. It's pink but not the same shade as the bike. It's disruptive. It's hideous. It represents everything Dazai hates.

Chuuya grabs it, looks back and forth between the helmet and Dazai and then very abruptly steps forward and places it over Dazai's head.

Dazai is very offended. "What are you doing?" he demands, flinging the helmet off and throwing it back at Chuuya. "I'm not wearing a helmet. You're the one who has a thing for hats, so you get to wear it."

"You need it more than me. If something happens, I'll be able to escape with my ability."

"Not if I'm touching you, and I can't see how I can ride as a passenger without holding on to you."

"During an accident, the passenger is more likely to be ejected from the motorcycle than the driver. And if that happens, you won't be touching me anymore, so I *could* use my ability." Chuuya counters extending the helmet towards Dazai.

Dazai makes a face as he uses both hands to push the helmet away like it's a disgusting slimy slug. "I'm not convinced by your argument. I'm not wearing that smothering headpiece."

"Yes. You. Are. *End of discussion.*"

Dazai falters. He's used to Chuuya getting temperamental but not to Chuuya being so assertive. Maybe it's the shock maybe it's something else, but in any case, he finds himself unwilling to argue. "You've convinced me of your argument," he says as he puts the helmet over his head, then waits for Chuuya to get on the motorcycle so that he can jump up behind.

It's not long until he starts hugging Chuuya like a koala, laying his chin on Chuuya's shoulder.

Dazai really, truly isn't scared, but he is pretty sure that Chuuya interprets the clingy behaviour as nerves. Which is fine. Dazai doesn't mind trading a crack in his reputation for the physical proximity. Usually, he isn't the biggest fan of sharing his personal space with others, much less touching them (which is just another reason for the bandages. Even clothes tend to make contact with his skin in all the wrong ways. The bandages are tight and safe, offering compression as well as protection. Like a tight hug, but without the human contact. Perfect.) For some reason though, he longs to reach out for Chuuya, and being plastered against his back doesn't feel wrong in the slightest. A little weird sure, but only in the sense that it will never ever be natural for Dazai to hug other people; he's too self-conscious to get lost in the physicality of either himself or others.

"Hey," Chuuya says, and it's spoken so quietly that it almost gets lost in the roar of the engine and the surrounding traffic. "Everything alright there?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" Dazai returns, hoping that the whole 'responding to a question with another question' counts as a sufficient answer.

It must be enough because Chuuya doesn't push the issue. Instead, he appears to focus his attention on navigating them safely through traffic, which is becoming denser as they approach central.

Dazai is very pleased and not at all surprised to learn that Chuuya doesn't need his ability to balance on the motorcycle; he operates it gracefully even without *For the Tainted Sorrow*, seamlessly blending in between the cars and moving along just above the speed limit - not enough to get caught on camera, though. It's very calculated and something that Dazai just has to comment on.

"I never took Chuuya to be so bound by rules. Why stick to the speed limit when breaking it is more fun and get us to the destination faster?"

They're so close, he's practically leaning his head on Chuuya's shoulder, and he knows that his breath must brush warm and damp on Chuuya's cheek.

Chuuya snorts. "You wanna know what isn't fun, though? Kunikida-san yelling at me loudly and incessantly for five hours straight when the agency receives the speeding ticket."

Dazai grins. "Ah, I see." He plasters himself even closer to Chuuya's back And syncopates his in- and exhales to Chuuya's heart-beat, that he feels clearly through layers of clothing. For reasons he can't comprehend, Chuuya's pulse registers more clearly to his senses than his own ever does. "The motorcycle is registered in the agency's name?"

"Obviously, I can't afford it on my own."

Dazai doesn't say anything, and that seems to concern Chuuya. "What? You're not going to boast about all the cars that you own? How much money you make as an executive. Smack your fortune in my face and tell me that you could buy 500 bikes like this one for your hourly salary?"

Dazai snickers. “How simple of you to think that I would spend my money on cars and such. I don’t own a single car.”

“What. Why?”

“Can’t drive. Haven't you noticed that I always have a driver?”

There’s a pause that seems to last forever, as Chuuya molls the question over, and then “Of course I noticed, but I thought you were just lazy.”

“I suppose that factors into it as well. I think… technically speaking, I could do it if I wanted to. I mean, I’ve watched enough people drive to have figured out how it’s done and I understand the mechanics of a car so on a theoretical level, I guess I *can* drive… on a practical level though, doubt I’d be any good at it.”

Chuuya laughs, and the sound flickers like a flame in the air. “Wow, are you actually admitting that there’s something you’re not good at? It’s a new side I’m seeing of you today.”

“I’m not admitting anything. I'm just saying that I’m *probably* not good at it, and my predictions tend to be true. I’m pretty good at hotwiring cars, though!”

Chuuya snorts. “You’re truly something else you bandage waster.”

They reach Chinatown with all its bustling energy, there are people, cars and bikes everywhere, and even a stray black cat that crosses the street right in front of them, daring its life to get to the other side of the street where there’s a seafood market. The sea breeze, which is Yokohama’s ever-present spirit, wafts through the narrow streets, grabbing hold of the wind chimes that hang from the eaves of many of the small houses - *ding dong* - a beautiful little symphony.

Dazai guides Chuuya into mafia territory. They pull up next to Kouyou’s high scale ochaya which, somewhat ironically, looks more like a temple than anything else. The property is built in a traditional architectural style; broad wood pillars that are left unpainted in appreciation of the grain, elegant slopes and lines, a gently curved roof and lattice windows that are covered by red blinds made of silk and lace.

Dazai hops off the bike and removes the helmet in a fluid motion. He shakes his head, hair swaying around wildly and falling back into place in a way that he hopes isn’t too flat. He turns and faces Chuuya with a blinding smile that silently asks for affirmation. He hands back the helmet to its rightful owner, and Chuuya accepts it but doesn’t respond to the unspoken question. He looks ahead to take in the building in front of them with suspicion clear in his eyes. “This… is that… a brothel?!”

“What gave it away? The red silk curtains?” Dazai asks.

“So it is a brothel.”

“That’s one word for it, yes, but I know the owner tends to avoid calling it that - gets her in legal trouble, you see.”

Chuuya's hold on the handle grip tightens visibly. There's a hint of a red glow around it that speaks of poorly suppressed anger and, dare Dazai speculate, jealousy.

"What's wrong, Chuuya?" he asks, batting his lashes, feigning ignorance.

Chuuya appears to have been plunged into a sea of mixed emotions, reflected as storm-tossed waves, in his blue eyes. The poor motorcycle handle grip is glowing brighter by the second and is probably not far away from being pulverized completely. "You... can't be serious. We just… you know… and we're in the middle of an investigation. You were supposed to figure out where the drugs came from, weren't you? and then you have the nerve to ask me to drop you off here, so you can-"

"So I can talk to the owner, Kouyou Ozaki I believe you've met her a couple of times, no?"

"Oh," Chuuya breaths out, eyes wide like tea saucers. "Didn't know she was an expert on drugs… or that she runs a b- whatever this is."

"She is, and she does," Dazai says calmly, artfully ignoring the quiet meltdown that the situation seems to cause Chuuya. "And by the nature of her job, she's an expert on certain drugs that can be used as aphrodisiacs… like blue lotus."

"*Aphrodisiacs?* " Chuuya questions. There's a shrill quality to his voice which seems to come from somewhere deep inside his most forbidden thoughts. Like the very idea of aphrodisiacs is preposterous.

He's not entirely wrong, and Dazai should let him know. "The thing is," Dazai starts, waving his hand around like he does when he's schooling the less intelligent mortals around him, but then quickly drops the hand again as he realises that it's wholly unnecessary: He knows better than to assume that Chuuya is anything but wildly intelligent. Dazai wouldn't even want to spend time around him if he wasn't smart enough to keep up. "There's no such thing as a pure aphrodisiac. I know that there's a wealth of anecdotes surrounding these drugs, but most of what you've heard is probably not true. They all work by releasing chemicals that can heighten suggestibility and sensitivity to sensory stuff - sometimes the desired effect is to cause sexual arousal, and the work for that too, but ultimately they just make people a bit more *cooperative* … if you know what I mean."

"I... I'm not sure I do."

Dazai sighs, but mostly for dramatic effect. "It's like I said. The thief used these types of drugs to put Kaneko into a suggestible state, and-"

"So like, hypnosis?" Chuuya interrupts.

"Kind of, yes."

"Okay… yeah. That all makes sense..." Chuuya trails off.

There's a strange kind of electricity in the air. Like a loaded current that sparkles in synchrony with Chuuya's shifting emotions and puts creases in the rain. Dazai is so very

sensitive to it that he fears he might get electrocuted, or drenched… or both.

“Why did you think I asked you to drop me off here, Chuuya?” he says, and very purposefully doesn’t add the accusation that is waiting just on the tip of his lips; he doesn't want it to sound like he cares whether Chuuya is jealous or not - no need to make the charged space between them more potent.

Chuuya is looking intently at the speedometer on his motorbike, although he’s at a standstill and can’t possibly be getting any useful or interesting information out of staring at it. “I’m driving back to the agency, call me when you’re done here, and let me know what you find out?”

“Sure thing〜” Dazai says, then gives a little wave before spinning on his heel and strolling off towards the ochaya’s entrance. The light breeze is working in his favour, tossing both his hair and his coat in a way that he is pretty sure looks attractive. He can feel Chuuya’s eyes burning a hole into his back and it feels a lot like being struck by lightning.

“Talk to you later, *partner*,” he calls over his shoulder because he has a compulsion to smother the jolt of electricity in the air under a storm of teasing.

Chuuya says something that gets lost in the rumble of the engine, as he starts it up. There’s that familiar smell of citrus, tobacco blending with gasoline as he departs on screeching wheels.

『◯』

The ochaya is a haven of hospitality; serene, refined and imbued with a sense of understated luxury throughout. The blend of classical architecture and contemporary amenities has been perfected: the walls are made of thick faux screens - fabric and frame fixed over modern construction; traditional aesthetic with far better soundproofing, which ensures an eerie quietness in the reception area despite what kind of noises might be coming from the private rooms.

Dazai takes off his shoes in the genkan and steps into the lobby where he is greeted by soft tatami mats and even softer smiles plastered on the faces of the oirans who stand ready to welcome customers.

Thin lanterns project subdued orange-hued light, bathing the room in a mellow beauty. One of the hostesses, who also could appropriately be described as a mellow beauty, walks up to Dazai. She’s wearing a floral print kimono with a red obi, and there’s an intricate flower arrangement perched, like a crown, on top of her head. She smells like tea and refinement.

“Good afternoon, sir.” Her voice is thin like a piece of paper, she hunches in on herself slightly, and her eyes are downcast - almost as though she waits for permission to take up more space.

“Hello, there!” Dazai smiles theatrically in the direction of the hostess. “I haven’t seen you before. You must be new?”

There's some tittering coming from the other oirans. "This is the executive we told you about, Takahashi-chan," one of them says around a sugary giggle. "Isn't he cute?"

The girl, Takashi, lifts her gaze slowly, peeking at Dazai through her lashes. "Yes, very handsome," she murmurs.

Dazai grins, wide and fake. "Why, thank you. That's too kind." He bows with extravagant flourish, deep and long. It elicits another round of snickers from his spectators, and Dazai receives it with the same submission that an actor accepts applause for playing a role he hates.

"Will you let Ozaki-san know that I'm here?" he asks.

A young man in a dark blue kimono and matching blue earrings steps forward. "She's busy filing paperwork, and she said she doesn't want to be interrupted under any circumstance, but I'd be happy to entertain you while you wait, Dazai-sama."

Dazai suppresses a strong urge to sigh loudly. He doesn't want to be snippy with the host, but something about his blue attire is just incredibly annoying. It's the wrong shade of blue entirely. "That's very generous, blue-bird," he says in his most tolerant tone, the one reserved for people he has absolutely no patience for. "I'm afraid it won't be necessary, though - she'll make time to see me. Is she in her office?"

"Yes but-"

Dazai waves a hand as though to brush his objection off. "I know the way. Thank you."

The boy in blue and two girls, respectively dressed in pink and red kimonos, rush after him. Their robes make inelegant shuffling sounds with every rushed step they take. And so, there's a noisy and colourful parade of people following Dazai down the long hallways and up the stairs, apparently adamant on escorting him to Kouyou's office.

"Oh, you all wanna help me find my way? Careful you don't fall over each other."

"You're so funny, Dazai-sama," the girl in red says, fluttering her lashes prettily. Her shiny brown eyes are curtained by cherry-red eyeshadow which Dazai thinks is supposed to match her attire. He doesn't enjoy her redness at all, though.

"Thank you, Red," he says and smiles perfunctorily. He is whatever these people want him to be, and the task of forcing mirth on cue isn't as bothersome as the idea of letting them down.

He reaches Kouyou's office and knocks on the door a single time - no need to be excessive. There isn't a single sound coming from the other side of the door, no rustling of papers, no long-winded sighs, no tapping of footsteps - absolutely zero indication that there's anyone in there or that they're on their way to open the door. Yet, a second later, the door swings open.

"I believe I told you that I don't want to be interrup-" Kouyou's eyes go from sharp to soft in an instant when she notices Dazai. "Oh. It's you."

She gives Dazai a once over, and it's with great satisfaction that he registers the way her face comes alive with a perfect little smile when her eyes travel down to look at his socks.

"They suit you," she comments, and Dazai preens.

"Thank you," he says, bowing his head. "I like them too. Don't even wanna take them off to shower."

The girl in pink laughs shrilly from somewhere on Dazai's left. "You need to undress before going into the shower!" she says through puffs of laughter.

The boy in blue, who's clutching Dazai's right arm like a lifeline, joins in with a chuckle. "You know, if undressing is too much of a chore, we could help you. We could run a nice hot bath for you, and help you undress, and sing for you, and scrub your back, and-"

"That's lovely," Dazai agrees, but he barely recognises the sound of his own voice. "I'm going to have to take you up on that offer at some point."

Three gasps and a synchronised "please do!" erupts from Blue, Red, and Pink. They're clinging to Dazai like cobwebs and trailing their fingers up his arms like little spiders, making him itch with silent discomfort.

Kouyou stifles a laugh. "I'm going to have to ban you from coming here. You cause too much disturbance."

Dazai shrugs half-heartedly. "I'm sorry, Ane-san. I can't seem to help it, everywhere I go trouble follows."

"Trouble is bad for business, and so is needless small-talk. You know what they say: time is money."

Dazai gives a thoughtful nod. "And when poverty moves in, love flies out the door."

Kouyou smiles, seemingly glad to hear her thoughts verbalised by her mentee. "So we should get to the point, shouldn't we? I haven't seen you in weeks, and now you show up looking like you haven't slept in all that time." Her eyebrows draw together like the very idea of Dazai losing sleep affronts her. "Why have you come to see me, brother dearest?"

"I wanted to pick your brain on something. Do you mind if we have this conversation in private?" Dazai subtly tilts his head towards the girl who's hugging his arm and nuzzling his shoulder. He knows that everyone who works in the ochaya is part of the mafia, which means that they can be trusted with confidential information, but he finds her proximity distracting - and not in a good way. He imagines it's a similar feeling to what a cat must feel when it's being stroked backwards - quite literally being rubbed the wrong way.

Kouyou nods and ushers Dazai towards the main drawing room at the end of the corridor.

The room is as stylish as the rest of the building, and despite being on the spacious side, it has a small, intimate feel. It smells faintly of jasmine, and the cloud covered sunlight that soaks through the windows is just as gentle.

It’s carefully decorated, with an eye for detail and charm: beautifully carved ra-ma on the walls, a single Acer bonsai in the corner, and a long bamboo table in the middle of the room. Low-seated chairs are arranged around the table like stones in a zen garden, and poised on top of one of the cushions there’s an orange and brown dotted cat.

“Hello, Sensei,” Dazai greets, and the cat meows happily in response.

Dazai slumps down into a cushion with the elegance of a half-full back of flour and then gets into a cross-legged position, tips of his socked feet peeking out.

“Would you like some tea, dear?” Kouyou asks.

“Do you have something stronger?”

“No,” she answers flatly. Dazai knows that it’s a baldfaced lie. There are all sorts of substances lying around in the ochaya, tea being the mildest. Still, he has too much respect for Kouyou’s confident delivery of the lie to call it out.

“What a shame,” he says, instead. “I guess tea will have to do then.”

“And I’m guessing you want the tea with the highest level of caffeine?”

“Yes, please. You know me so well〜”

Kouyou excuses herself before heading for the kitchens to go prepare the tea. Dazai makes himself comfortable, pulling out his phone from his pocket and starting a game of virtual chess against the evil AI, which moves around the white pawns with terrifying efficiency.

He is distracted from the game when something warm and heavy plunks into his lap. He looks down and is met by the deep brown cat eyes - orbs of wisdom even saints couldn’t comprehend.

“What can I do for you, Sensei?” he inquires, and the cat responds by nudging his hand - silently asking to be stroked.

“And Mori calls *me* attention-seeking,” Dazai exhales as he obeys the request. He nuzzles behind the cat's ears and then moves on to run his hand through the soft fur. The reward comes in the form of soft purring and content meows.

For a short moment, he considers stroking backwards, curious to see if cats dislike being stroked against the grain of their fur as much as he thinks they do. In the end, though, he decides against it; he doesn't want to risk ending up in Sensei’s bad book.

Kouyou returns carrying a tray, and somehow she makes the mundane act seem profoundly meaningful - like she’s carefully balancing the entire universe on the tray rather than just a steaming pot of tea and two ceramic cups.

“Oolong tea. Not the strongest, but the one that’s easiest on your stomach.” She transfers the tray’s contents onto the low table, and that’s when Dazai notices the plate with mochi balls and a single pair of chopsticks.

“Those look delicious. Are they for me?”

Kouyou lets out a soft exhale. “Yes. Not only have you been sleeping too little, you also look like someone who hasn't been eating enough lately.”

She sits down next to Dazai, and just like everything Kouyou does, the action seems to carry a certain weight of importance. She reaches for the chopsticks and picks up a pink mochi.

Dazai knows what is coming, and he is almost ashamed to admit to himself how much it pleases him. How much he needs it.

“Are you worried about me, sister?” he questions softly, feigning ignorance.

Kouyou hovers the mochi inches in front of Dazai’s mouth. “Yes. open up.”

Dazai does, and the whole thing is pushed into his mouth, not forcefully enough to be considered rude, but with a certain degree of determination. It's sweet, soft and simple like nothing in life ever is. He chews on it silently and lets Kouyou observe him as he does.

There’s an overwhelming tenderness to the way she traces his every movement, and it proves just how extraordinary she is in all that she does: mafiosos aren’t supposed to be warm and affectionate, but she has somehow managed to carve a character for herself that’s defined by her immense care for others.

Dazai on his part loves receiving her unlimited positive regard - even if he doesn't think he deserves it.

“Can I have some tea, too?” he asks. He doesn’t dare pour a cup of tea for himself as he knows that Kouyou considers herself the guardian of the teapot, that she firmly believes that there are right and wrong ways of pouring tea and that she’s the only one who’s capable of doing it *the right way*.

Kouyou nods shrewdly, most at ease when she's the one taking care of things. She pours the tea straight from the pot without spilling a single drop.

“So," she says as she lifts a cup and brings it to Dazai’s lips, “what is it, you wanted to talk to me about?”

Dazai doesn’t know if he’s supposed to answer or take a sip, but he knows that when faced with a hard dilemma the best option, generally, is to go with neither: He waits for the leaves in the cup to drift down and settle along the bottom of the cup. Then he blows over the hot liquid, watching as it creates little rippling waves - a whole ocean in a teacup.

“Clever boy,” Kouyou coos, the corners of her lips curling upwards, “keeping your breath to cool the tea.”

Dazai takes the cup and holds it with his right hand while supporting it from below with his left. He has to be careful not to spill, he has a terrible habit of doing so, and he knows how much Kouyou dislikes being subjected to the second-hand embarrassment of someone else's social faux pas.

“I’m investigating the mysterious disappearance of a painting from the Mori Art Museum, which I’m sure you’ve heard about.”

She hums quietly, fingers thoughtfully touching her chin. “I see. I’m curious now. What about that case could require my input?”

“I wanted to ask you about Blue Lotus. There were traces of it found in a victim’s bloodstream, and I’m trying to figure out where it came from.”

“Oh, I didn’t know there were *victims*. I hope this isn’t turning into a violent affair?” There’s a small worry line appearing on Kouyou's forehead, and Dazai loathes to think that he’s the one responsible for creating it. “I don’t think it will,” he assures her, and Kouyou’s face reverts to its usual smooth perfection, a delicate little pink-painted smile curving up at the corners and matching the arch of her eyeliner.

“That’s good to hear. I don’t trust you to walk into dangerous situations, you have way too little sense of self-preservation, to act wisely in them.”

Dazai knows better than to argue with her, so he doesn’t mention the fact that his job necessitates that he gets into dangerous situations on a fairly regular basis. Instead, he takes a sip of his tea and waits for Kouyou to finish. Her eyes are sharp like her katana but somehow still deep with endless kindness, “but if you promise to at least try and stay out of trouble, I suppose I have no reason not to help you.”

Dazai smiles mischievously, “and having no reason not to do something is enough of a reason to do it.”

Kouyou ignores the comment and continues: “Blue lotus, like all lotuses, only grows in the mud. They’re beautiful flowers of darkness, rare and very sought after.”

“Yes, you’ve told me *that* before. That’s not that kind of information I was looking for, though. Was hoping you could tell me who sells it around here.”

Kouyou winks. “I know. Just thought you could do with a little reminder. A lot can be learned from studying botany, you know.”

“Yes,” Dazai agrees, “I know you believe that to be true. Now tell me what I really want to know.”

“Manners, please.”

“Now tell me what I really want to know, *please*.”

“Good. There’s only one supplier in the Kanto region, and he only trades with large organisations, never private dealers. It’s rather rare that yakuza resell these types of drugs… drugs hold significant power, and we don’t tend to want to share that - it’s generally better to keep power localised than dispersed. Like here in Yokohama: my ochaya is the only place which offers blue lotus, and it’s always taken on site.”

“So it looks like we’re dealing with yakuza? I suspected that much. A single-player wouldn’t wanna steal a painting so famous... also wouldn’t be gutsy enough to do it. But can you tell me which groups the dealer sells to?”

“Aside from the port mafia, I’m only aware that he sells to the Fumiko-gumi and the Yamada-kai.”

Dazai nods in understanding and closes his eyes for a second to think. Both groups are based in central Tokyo, so that narrows down the search-area significantly.

He re-opens his eyes, hoping that they sparkle with appropriate amounts of gratitude. “Thank you, Ane-san. That was exactly the kind of information I was hoping for.”

Kouyou smiles softly, accepting the gratitude with poise. “But how are you going to handle this? Did Ougai-dono give you any instructions?”

Dazai shrugs. “Nope, the boss must trust me to do the right thing.” His mind chews a little more on the question, dancing around the edges of it. “... or maybe he trusts the ADA to do the right thing.”

Kouyou raises a perfectly shaped eyebrow. “Oh. Our friends over at the agency are involved? How lovely.” Her voice is rather flavourless, not exactly sarcastic but not exactly sincere either.

“Lovely indeed,” Dazai replies, “anyway, I’ll hope to be able to do this as smoothly as possible. I'd rather not start a war, and I’d also rather not hand over the thief to the police.”

“Sounds like good judgement on your part. We don’t wanna start a war with another Yakuza group, and we certainly don't want to play that game where we try to get each other's member locked up.” She pours a second cup of tea for herself and puts down the teapot with finality. “I like your approach. It’s classy.”

“Thank you. That’s what I was aiming for.” He buries his hands in sensei’s fur again, enjoying the silky warmness as his hands filter through it. “There’s something else I wanted to discuss with you.”

“I’m all ears,” Kouyou says, placing the teacup back on the table and folding her hands in her lap, receptive like an antenna, taking in whatever half-pieced-together information is thrown her way and transforming it into something meaningful.

Dazai exhales slowly. “I wanted to ask you if… you have a remedy for stomach issues?” he says, hoping it doesn’t sound too uncertain.

Kouyou blinks. “Why are you asking me about this? I’m not a doctor.”

“I don’t trust doctors.”

“I suppose that’s understandable,” Kouyou acknowledges. She tilts her head, eyes bright and considering. “Why do I get the feeling that this isn’t about stomach issues?”

Dazai hesitates for just a second, he realises that this is his last opportunity to change the topic, and never mention it ever again. He quickly decides to kiss that opportunity goodbye, and bravely explains the problem: “I’ve been having weird *reactions* lately.”

He digs his fingers into Sensei's fur, and the cat lets out a discontent mewl, which instantly has Dazai loosen his grip. “Oops. sorry,” he mutters meekly.

“When you say reactions?” Kouyou questions, “you mean... feelings?”

“Feelings?” Dazai echoes. The word tastes misplaced on his tongue - like taking a big bite of an apple only to learn that it is actually an onion. It’s sharp and pungent, but Kouyou has a way of neutralizing his concerns, so it seems safe enough to elaborate.

“I don’t have a lot of *feelings* - they're such wishy-washy things, whenever I try to catch one, it slides from my hold and into an endless abyss,” Dazai says, leaning back in his seat with his hands behind his head.

“There’s no need to be so dramatic.”

“It’s true,” he insists, wiggling his toes slightly to feel that they’re still there. “But something’s a bit off, and I don’t know what. I talked to the boss earlier, and the whole time I just felt very confused.”

"You were probably just angry or annoyed. Ougai-dono does have a special talent for getting on one's nerves."

Dazai considers it for a moment but is quick to discard the idea. ”I don’t usually get those types of feelings around him. At least not so strongly.”

“Well, I can’t tell you what you felt or why you responded so strongly. Maybe you’re just a little sensitive lately - that would make sense, with how you haven’t been sleeping and eating enough.” There’s a strong accusatory edge to her voice, but Dazai ignores it.

“Honestly, not eating and sleeping enough is the norm for me.” He ignores the dismayed look Kouyou shoots him for that comment and continues, ”it’s not even like I’m particularly bothered by the thing with the boss, but I’ve been having a lot of reactions around Chuuya too and-”

“Oh, this is about Nakahara?” Kouyou sounds unsurprised that Chuuya would be brought up in the conversation. Surprisingly unsurprised.

“Should have known you’d fall for him and have a complete crisis over it. That’s what has you a little sensitive lately, isn’t it?”

Dazai’s confused, which is a rare and uncomfortable state of mind for him. “I don’t know,” he admits.

Kouyou shakes her head as though she finds Dazai incredibly dimwitted. “How do you *feel* about the Nakahara boy?” she asks.

Skittering images of Chuuya zips through Dazai's mind, only to be shoved aside.

"I'm not sure," he confesses, composure somewhat ruffled, "but just because I don't feel much, doesn't mean that I don't *want* things." Admitting that much feels a little more awkward than it should, like getting a papercut from a love letter.

Kouyou studies him with inquisitive eyes. "Want things like what?"

Dazai has very good control over his own body, but when he feels his face heating up, it's not something he's doing on purpose at all.

Kouyou's smile transforms into something very pleased. "Are you blushing?" she asks in a rather high-pitched voice, and it's the closest thing to a squeal he has ever heard from her.

"No, it's not like that. I don't... I... it's the mochi - they're doing things to my blood sugar, and-"

"Shh. it's okay. Please don't come up with rationalisations." She holds a hand up as a stop signal. "Can I ask you something?"

"Okay." He tries not to give in to the desire to lift his hands and cover his burning cheeks.

"Does he have a green thumb?"

The question is so on-brand for Kouyou who, for some reason, enjoys delivering her words of wisdom as complex riddles instead of just talking like a normal person.

"I think so," Dazai answers, "I know he has bonsai trees."

Kouyou blinks, and there's a small twitch of her mouth that speaks of approval. "But if I asked him to take care of one of my gardens, could I trust that he would be able to do so?"

"I think so."

"And If you were a plant, would you want Nakahara to water you?"

Dazai snorts, delighted by the imagery. "Absolutely."

"He has my blessings, then." She stands up in a fast but graceful motion, like a pillar shooting out of the earth. "Now, go find your boy. You're looking terribly dehydrated."

"Trying to get rid of me?" Dazai says around a grin as he gently shoos Sensei away and stands up.

Kouyou's face pulls into an affronted look. "I'd never."

She slips something out from behind her wrist; a little soft-looking package wrapped in silk paper. Dazai will forever pretend that he hadn't seen her hiding it all along. "What's that." He asks, appropriately curious although he has a pretty good idea of what it might be.

“It’s a surprise. You can’t open it until you need it.”

Dazai gives her a conspiratorial look. “And how will I know when I need it?”

“Intuition.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
I love hearing from you, so please leave a comment and let me know what you think!
I also love kudos <3
If you wanna cry/scream/laugh over soukoku with me, you can also find me on Tumblr.

Notes:
kinda stole this idea from Pride and Prejudice: “There is a fine old saying, which everybody here is, of course, familiar with: ‘Keep your breath to cool your porridge’
The ‘naming opposites’ game Dazai and Chuuya play is inspired by the game of antonyms that’s mentioned in No Longer Human by Dazai Osamu.

5. Rosetinted glasses

Chapter Summary

> They both have it SO BAD. Also, Dazai looks unfairly handsome wearing Kunikida's glasses.

Chapter Notes

> Hi there.
> Hope you're all doing well and taking good care of yourselves 💖
>
> I hope you'll enjoy this chapter, thank you for reading!
>
> Warning for really bad physics. If there are any physics enthusiasts reading, I sincerely apologize for the explanations of gravity and electricity you're about to read.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A raindrop hits Dazai's cheek. It's soft like a kiss but cold and disinterested.

The Armed Detective Agency's offices aren't located that far from Kouyou's ochaya, so despite the rain Dazai decides that walking is a better plan than waiting around for a car to pick him up and take him there.

There are few items on 'the list of things that Dazai hates' which rank higher than *waiting*. Getting wet is uncomfortable, but it doesn't come close to the absolute agony of having to wait around with nothing to do except marinating in racing thoughts.

So walking it is. And walking is fine. Or it would be if not for the stupid rain, which seems to intensify by the minute, and the annoying puddles which have gathered on the sidewalk like unavoidable minefields and explode with loud sloshing sounds as Dazai steps through them.

The rain soaks through layers of fabric at an alarming rate; his trenchcoat is heavy with it and even his bandages - his precious layer of second skin - are starting to become damp.

He turns right at the end of the street, makes two left turns, and then the red-brick building, which houses the agency's offices comes into view. The building looks old, but sturdy for its age.

Dazai doesn't enjoy exercise all that much because it tires him out in the worst ways (body exhausted, mind still excruciatingly hyperactive), but he breaks into a light jog regardless.

The breeze is getting more aggressive too, turning into a proper wind which grabs hold of his coat and tosses it around so that it looks like a giant black bat which follows right on his heels.

He hurries up to the entrance, and as soon as the door closes behind him, he slouches against it, waiting for his heaving breath to return to normal.

Getting enough oxygen into his lungs is a bit of a struggle, but it's not a big deal, and he's certain it's entirely due to the humid weather.

His faster than normal heart rate, and the slight shaking of his hands are a bit anomalous though. Still, it's nothing that he can't force to go away by sheer willpower.

When he's feeling more composed (as composed as is possible, drenched from top to toe in sheets of merciless rain) he walks up to the old elevator and presses the call button.

While he waits, he takes a moment to appreciate the lobby's architecture.

It's based on a cheaper version of 1930s art-deco style, design elements working together to evoke something that might be the past's vision of a machine age.

And while it's undoubtedly charming with its garish combination of red, green and gold flung into streamlined forms, smooth lines and geometric shapes, it also doesn't appear to have been renovated at all since it was built. Paint is cracking here and there, the green tiles on the walls look a little faded, rust is slowly creeping up the stair balusters and the big tinted windows with the intricate panel design, although clean, are a little grey-ish from the smog they've absorbed over the years.

The elevator is another case in point: there are some ominous creaking noises coming from the elevator shaft, and then the doors draw open, slowly, raggedly, tiredly.

When the doors are fully open and Dazai's about to step inside, he's hit by a rather unpleasant smell. One that's hard to place with any accuracy; sweet and horridly synthetic - to the point that it's making his nose itch.

He concludes that it's probably a cleaning agent that's supposed to smell like apples. He also concludes that he can't deal with it and that he actually doesn't hate exercise all that much. And so, he opts for the stairs instead.

He climbs up to the second floor at a slow but even pace, leaving a trail of water drops behind him.

He doesn't bother knocking when he comes up to the wooden door, just pushes it open and enters in all his dripping-wet glory.

The muted conversation that Dazai steps into immediately subsides and a hush falls over the room. A tremulous silence.

A number of the agency's members are gathered around a mahogany desks. Chuuya and Atsushi sit on one side of the table, both with a pencil in hand and bowed over a piece of

paper. From Dazai's view, it looks like they're working on a doodle of a dragon.

On the other side of the table, Yosano takes up two chairs, reclined in one and feet settled delicately on the other; crossed at the ankle and perched on top of a pillow.

Kunikida stands at the end of the table, straight as a rod and with his hands on his hips. The light reflects in his glasses and authority reflects in his posture.

Chuuya is the first to break the silence. "I told you to call me when you were don-"

"Dazai-san, you're all wet. Are you okay?" Atsushi interrupts as he leaps up from his seat, paces across the room and comes right up in Dazai's space.

His big, bright violet-gold eyes are wide with concern. "I'll get you a towel, and a change of clothes. Come on, follow me."

He ushers Dazai towards a door, which presumably leads to some kind of backroom. Dazai willingly follows along, cause while he does find being the center of attention pretty enjoyable, he's too vain to appreciate having the spotlight on him when he looks a wringing wet mess. "That's so nice of you Atsushi-kun〜"

There's the screeching of a chair, and a second later Chuuya is blocking their way. How he manages to move so fast is beyond even Dazai's massive intelligence.

Why Dazai's heartbeat picks up its sluggish pace is also, somewhat embarrassingly, beyond his massive intelligence.

Chuuya's eyes narrow into slits as they focus in on Atsushi. "What do you mean, you'll get him a change of clothes, we don't keep spare clothes lying around," he seethes.

Atsushi's head turns, eyes darting around as though looking for answers. "Um... but…? I do."

"That's not going to work," Chuuya shoots back, throwing his hands up in the air. His frustration matches his hair, which flies around his head like a fiery halo.

"What do you mean it's not going to work? It has to work," Atsushi responds, gesturing towards Dazai, "look at him, he's shaking. He can't walk around in wet clothes."

Chuuya crosses his arms in front of his chest. "You don't have anything that's going to fit that tall beanpole," he declares.

His mood appears significantly more pissy than the idea of ill-fitting clothes accounts for.

Dazai sighs, deep and theatrical. "I'm sure it'll be fine! Now Chuuya, if you would get out of the way?"

Chuuya scowls but acquiesces, stepping to the side and allowing them to pass.

Atsushi shows Dazai to what appears to be a storage room. It's fairly stuffed for its small size, a big round table in the middle, a mini-fridge in the corner, lockers lining the back wall, and a whole cardboard box filled to the brim with sweets (on it is a note written in the most exquisite handwriting, which reads *Emergency snacks. Don't even think about touching my stash without permission - Ranpo*.)

The space is illuminated by two crackling and flickering fluorescent light tubes, which shine about a million watts too bright for Dazai's liking.

He squints slightly as he tries to adjust to the sea of blinding light that falls upon him, leaking right through his eyes and into his brain like some kind of poison. It hurts.

Atsushi, who doesn't seem to be bothered by the unnatural degree of brightness, gets out a spare set of clothes from one of the lockers. It consists of a pair of black corduroy trousers and a white shirt. By the looks of it, neither is going to fit, but Dazai still accepts the change of clothes with a grateful smile.

Dazai takes out his few belongings from his pockets and places them on the table: keys, ID badge, the gift from Kouyou, and his phone. By some kind of miracle his phone appears to be in okay condition. The screen is a little foggy, but the thing still works despite being half-drowned, so Dazai counts it as a solid success.

He starts stripping out of his coat. The thing is sticking to him like a soggy, heavy, sheath and everything about is irksome.

Once off, He lets the coat drop to the ground. It makes a rather disgusting splashing-like sound as it falls.

He looks down at his arms, bandages peeking out under the cuff of his shirt.

He then raises his head to find Atsushi already staring at him with glazed over eyes, that he quickly avert to look at the ground like he's been caught doing something wrong.

"M' sorry," he mutters through half bitten lips, expression misty and apologetic, looking and sounding like the perfect picture of a pathetic human being. It's rather adorable and Dazai is starting to understand why Akutagawa has a thing for the white-haired detective - they have a lot in common. Dazai should work a little harder on setting that thing up, the two of them are disgustingly perfect for each other.

"No need to apologize," Dazai reassures.

Atsushi still seems fixated on gazing down at his feet but does mutter a reply: "I should leave you to it." He spins around and reaches for the door.

"Wait a second," Dazai says, "I wanted to ask you something."

Atsushi's outstretched hand drops.

"So..." Dazai muses, "you guys constantly get in trouble, don't you? Need something to patch you up afterwards, right?"

“We… um. What are you asking?”

And there’s another thing the Jinko has in common with Akutagawa: he's too much of an overthinker to be vague around. Dazai will have to be very literal then. What a chore.

“Do you have bandages somewhere in this building?”

“Oh. Yeah, I’m sure Yosano-sensei has some in her infirmary, I’ll ask her. I’ll be right back,” he says and he sounds so enthusiastic about it, that Dazai has to reward him with one of his most believable smiles.

Atsushi leaves, and Dazai waits, still as a statue, with his hands clasped lightly in front of him.

The wet clothing is getting more uncomfortable by the second, and the only solution to the awful feeling of wet clinginess is to stand completely motionless and pretend that it’s not happening. Dazai quite often employs that approach - it’s what gets him through situations that he’d rather not be in - like an ostrich sticking its head into the ground, he lets his awareness seep out of his body and into the ether.

There’s a knock on the door and Dazai is pulled out of his little trance. He carefully moulds his face into something appropriately humane for Atsushi’s sake.

Except it isn’t Atsushi who enters the room.

The door swings open with a loud *bang* that seems to rattle the whole building. There’s the tell-tale flare of red, and then Chuuya is standing in the room. He’s carrying more rolls of bandages in his arms than Dazai usually goes through in a whole month.

Dazai relaxes his features. “Did you use your ability to open the door?” he asks.

“Yes. Problem?”

Dazai laughs, and to his amazement, the laugh is almost entirely genuine; uncontrolled in the way it ripples through him, gently pushing the sluggishness from his mind and the dull ache from his bones. “No, of course not. Just marvelling at how strong Chuuya is. Try less force next time.”

Chuuya drops the rolls of bandages on the table. “There you go, bandage waster.” He offers a half-smile that’s a little too self-satisfied to be cute, so Dazai doesn’t know why his stomach flips in response.

Ignoring his traitorous body’s strange behaviour, he starts removing his wet shirt. He's grateful to have something to occupy his hands with, even if his fingers fumble a little more than usual when he unbuttons it.

The minifridge hums quietly in the corner, and the light tubes continue their crackling conversation.

Then Chuuya’s voice carries over the almost-silence: “Why do you wear bandages anyway?”

Dazai's head snaps up to look at Chuuya who slaps a hand over his mouth as though he has said something terrible; like it's a great transgression to ask such questions.

"You don't have to answer that," he half-whispers, low and contrite - almost so imperceptible as to get lost in the background noise.

Dazai toys idly with a button on his shirt. "Why wouldn't I?" he asks.

"Cause it's personal, no?"

Dazai looks down at his hands. They seem so far away.

He hesitates for a prolonged moment but then answers: "It's not a big deal, so if you wanna know...?"

"I do." Chuuya's voice sounds eager and hesitant at the same time; sincere in a way that seems to carry a promise of confidentiality.

Dazai smiles, and makes sure to weave a bit of playfulness into his features. "You can solve any major problem with bandages," he explains.

"That's… hmm," Chuuya trails off, rubbing his chin, and looking at Dazai with a puzzled look on his face.

He takes a deep breath and then adds: "I suppose it's true in a metaphorical sense."

"Yes, I can be very poetic when I want to be."

Chuuya smiles wistfully. "But it's not the whole truth is it?"

There's a tentativeness to the moment that's almost painful, and it sticks its claws into Dazai's flesh and leaves bloody scratches all the way down his back.

Dazai doesn't know how he's supposed to answer, but he has to say *something*.

"No," he settles on, smile turning into a lopsided thing, "truths are rare and mysterious little creatures. I'll let you know if I ever catch one, though."

Chuuya hums. He's looking balanced to leave, body turning towards the door. "I'll go find a bag for your wet clothes," he says.

"M'kay."

Dazai finally manages to struggle out of his shirt, peeling it off his arms and feeling a lot like a snake shedding a layer of skin. It's wet and clingy and uncomfortable to a degree that's making him lose his mind a little, a sensation that sends waves of tension through his entire brain.

The process of removing the wet bandages and reapplying the dry ones is done with practised grace - there's a methodicalness to the procedure which he finds amazingly comforting.

He closes his eyes because the blaze of light that pours down from above, like a dying star, blinds him. Even without the visual cues, though, it doesn't take him much more than a minute to wrap himself up from head to toe.

For no obvious reason, he fastens the bandages just a little tighter than he usually does.

Atsushi's unflattering clothing then comes on. It doesn't feel right at all, shirt too tight for Dazai's preference and trousers a bit on the short side, but at least it's dry.

He reaches for the gift he got from Kouyou and opens it. The outer brown wrapping paper is, of course, grossly wet - to the point that it's almost disintegrating, but inside he finds a pair of socks protected by a thin waterproof plastic foil that appears to have kept them shielded from the rain.

They're pastel purple with little white stars on and incredibly soft. They're also just about the best gift he has ever received.

He puts them on and then closes his eyes again, depriving himself of visual input and focuses on the soft cotton cloud that envelopes his feet.

There's a loud knock on the door, and then Chuuya's voice carries through: "Can I come in?"

"Sure, come in, Chuuya~ I'm decent." Dazai blinks his eyes open again, narrowing them as to not allow too much light to flood his senses.

Chuuya's holding a wrinkled plastic bag from Ito Yokado in his hand. "Oh," he breathes out, "does the light bother you?"

He points up at the two hostile fluorescent lamps.

Dazai shrugs, ambiguous. "Nah, I'm not *bothered*."

He tries to stop squinting, but his eyes instantly start watering and that's probably worse. "It's just a little uncomfortably bright in here, isn't it?"

Chuuya's hand starts glowing red with his ability, and the air grows heavy, sizzling like a molecular cloud breaking into smaller and smaller pieces.

The light flickers a couple of times and then dims significantly.

Dazai mouth almost drops, before his self-awareness kicks back in to remind him that he isn't supposed to look all fish-mouthed and dumb. "How did you do that, Chuuya?"

"What?"

"Dim the light."

"With my ability, duh?"

"But how? That shouldn't be possible."

“... why not?”

“Current is the flow of charged particle-electrons under the influence of voltage, but even though electrons do have mass, they’re too small to have much of a gravitational field.”

“And?” Chuuya asks, obviously not understanding where Dazai is going with the explanation.

“It should be impossible, so how’d you do it?”

Chuuya shrugs again.

Dazai narrows his eyes. “For you to affect the current flow in a circuit, you have to overpower the force exerted by the voltage or the source. That would be like trying to change the trajectory of a train by simply blowing some air on it from your mouth. Impossible.”

“Not impossible - I just did it. I don’t know how I did it, but I did, and you saw it with your own two eyes, so...”

“So, you use your ability without knowing how it works? You’re a weird one.”

Chuuya crosses his arms in front of his chest. “Says the one who understands the mechanics of cars but can’t drive? Between the two of us, I think I’m the one who’s coming down on the right side of the balance between theory and practice.”

Chuuya uncrosses his arms and looks at Dazai with a playful gleam in his eyes, the blue of his irises shining like two suns reflected in the ocean. “Why do you know so much about gravity anyway?”

The question hits Dazai like a soft-handed smack right to the face: unexpected, mocking and happening too fast for him to do anything to prevent it.

He begins to speak, knowing he has to. “Don’t flatter yourself,” he says, tone suitably nonchalant, “it has nothing to do with you, or your ability, and everything to do with me being smart.”

“Oh, really?” Chuuya asks with a teasing edge to his voice. One that Dazai likes more than he cares to admit. And so, he doesn’t admit to anything at all. “I watched a physics documentary once a long time ago, and my genius brain retained the information. That’s all.” His indifferent tone should be enough to sell the lie, but Chuyya doesn’t look convinced.

“Whatever you say, Mackerel.”

"Whatever," Dazai agrees with a huff and takes the offered plastic bag.

He smells it to see what kinds of dreadful substances might have been in it and to determine if it's worthy of his wet clothing.

It smells mostly of plastic which is neither surprising or offensive enough for him to discard it, and so he throws his wet clothing into it and drops it unceremoniously in the corner.

Chuuya glances at the door. “Are you ready to face the crowd, again?”

“I don’t know, am I?” Dazai looks down on himself to gauge his current state of stylishness. He doesn’t rate it highly. “Can I even go out, looking like this?”

Chuuya scrunches his nose. “Well, you’re going to have to, but if you’re asking me if I think you look good in that,” Chuuya runs his eys over the white shirt, which sits uncomfortably tight over Dazai’s bandages, “then the answer is no.”

Dazai pouts. “That’s harsh.”

"I just don’t think it’s your colour...”

Dazai blinks a couple of times and then melts into an easy liquid state of amusement - it’s truly the flimsiest excuse for an explanation he has ever heard. “It’s white, Chuuya. I wear white shirts all the time, and you’ve never complained before."

Chuuya crosses his arms over his chest as though he’s trying to create a defensive armour. His fingers dig into his sweater sleeves, and they're turning slightly white at the knuckles. “Well,” he says, flat and toneless, “I have a problem with it now.”

“You really don’t like the idea of me wearing Atsushi-kun’s clothing, do you? Why? What’s the problem?”

Chuuya looks away. His lips are pursed as though he's trying to zip them together, ensuring that whatever words are on the tip of his tongue won’t spill out.

“You know,” Dazai chirps, mischief evident in his tone, “if you have a problem, you should do something about it. You're not going to chase it away with your pettiness... I think it requires a little more action."

He tilts his chin in challenge, making sure to stitch promises of great rewards into his crooked smile.

He looks straight into Chuuya eyes, observing dilated pupils floating in the middle of a dark blue sea. A sea which Dazai struggles to stay afloat in. He's daring the Chuuya to accept the challenge.

Chuuya steps closer, and despite the constant active buzz of *No Longer Human*, which usually consumes everything around it and turns it into nothing, Dazai can feel the particles around him becoming heavier, gravity weighing down on the very fabric of reality like a weighted blanket.

“And you,” Chuuya murmurs in a low voice that sounds as dangerous as it sounds enticing, “should learn to ask nicely.”

Dazai is being strangled by the intensity of the moment, and it's a strangely heady feeling, strangely confusing, strangely wonderful. “What do you mean?”

“If there’s something you want, you should *ask* for it.”

That’s’ ridiculous. Dazai doesn’t ask for the things he wants, he finds a way of making people think that they want to give it to him.

“What is it you think I want, Chuuya?” Dazai asks, genuinely intrigued. It’s rather unusual for him to embrace his whims as freely as he seems to do around Chuuya; to want things so daringly without fearing that they’re taken away from him the moment he touches them, and he’s curious as to how much of his whole thin heart’s desires are obvious to Chuuya.

A silence so chilled that Dazai can practically see his breath turning to fog falls over them.

And then Chuuya smirks. “Atsushi was right: You’re freezing. Your lips are practically blue."

Dazai frowns. Yes, he’s cold, but so what? He fancies himself a coldblooded being - completely incapable of producing his own body heat.

"Cold is familiar," he says although it doesn’t feel like the right thing to say. He doesn’t know how to explain the extent to which he's reliant on his surroundings to provide warmth, especially when they often fail to do so. Doesn’t know if there’s a way to even think it without falling into a spiral of self-pity.

Chuuya shakes his head. “You’re missing the point,” he says, "just admit that you wanna be warm.”

In a swift motion, he pulls his ugly oversized sweater over his head and throws it at Dazai. “Here, loser. Wear this.”

Dazai considers causing a scene for a whole second but abandons the idea. He doesn’t think that purple is his colour any more than white is but the sweater matches his socks and it smells like citrus and tobacco so he’ll wear it.

He pulls the hoodie over his head and fixes his hair. “That’s very nice of you Chuuya. You completely caught me by surprise there. Didn’t know you were a nice person.”

Chuuya pinches his brow. “Please just shut up.” He turns around and opens the door, quickly moving through it and looking over his shoulder to check if Dazai is following along.

“You annoy me so much, I don't know why I even put up with all your shit,” he grumps although he sounds more amused than angry.

Dazai leans close to Chuuya’s ear.

“That’s cause you looooooooove me~” he whispers and laughs maniacally when Chuuya shoves a pointy elbow in his ribs.

Still, Chuuya offers a tentative smile just a second later. “My sweater looks okay on you,” he admits, and it sounds a little reluctant, but Dazai treasures the compliment nonetheless so he smiles back as sweetly as he can.

He doesn’t quite understand what Chuuya is being so nice for, but he also doesn't mind being the irritating stray kitten the detective can’t stop petting.

『◯』

They return to the main room, walking side by side. Dazai senses a surge of awareness as they enter.

Kunikida appears to be suffocating under a heavy, suffocating weight of frustration, which has him staring out the window like a dejected sailor who hasn’t seen land in months.

Atsushi is sitting in a chair hunched in on himself, occupied with nothing except picking his nails and shooting a few worried glances at Kunikida’s back, and Yosano is still sprawled in a chair, hands busy cleaning a sharp cone-like thing which Dazai presumes is a medical instrument; not one he has ever seen before and certainly not one he wishes to know the function off.

“How’s the patient, sensei?” Dazai asks.

Yosano looks up, the look in her eyes blank and disappointed. “Boring”, she sighs. “He’s asleep, again… totally fine. Was fine even when he came in. Despite the unholy levels of drugs in his system there was never any danger of cardiac arrest, seizures or the like,” she sighs again, heavy and dejected, “he’ll make a full recovery without the need of my special treatment.”

Dazai nods seriously. “Oh, that’s a shame.”

He thinks that it is quite lucky for Kaneko that he doesn’t require Yosano’s *special treatment*, but he doesn’t voice that out loud.

He sinks into a chair and makes sweater paws out of Chuuya’s oversized hoodie. It’s exceptionally comfortable, and he’s seriously considering stealing it.

Yosano is side-eyeing him with an awfully knowing smile tucking on her lips.

Dazai returns her gaze. “What?” he croaks at her.

“Oh, nothing.” She reclines further in her chair, “was just thinking that Chuuya-kun’s sweater suits you better than it suits him.”

“That’s not true,” Chuuya grumbles, voice deep like distant thunder.

Yosano answers with a deadpan look. “It’s too big on you, Chibiko, and you know it.”

Dazai feels laughter bubbling up in his throat. “Don’t worry, *Chibiko*,” he simpers, “it’s not you. It’s just my astonishing gift of making everything I wear look splendid.” He throws a hand up in the air and starts fanning himself with it. “Simply too good looking, you see - I mean except for when I’m wearing white, right?” he winks at Chuuya, “anyway, I bet I could even make Kunikida-san’s plain-looking glasses look good.”

“My glasses aren’t plain,” Kunikida sneers.

Dazai laughs in his face, and swiftly reaches out to snatch the glasses right off Kunikida's face.

“They are the plainest!” he declares as he puts them on, knowing exactly how annoying he's being, “only someone possessing my unbridled charm could pull off wearing them.”

“Excuse me?” Kunikida yelps, voice like a stressed foghorn. It sounds like all of his primal instincts are being set off, and for a whole second, Dazai considers being kinder to the poor man’s nerves.

He then decides that it’s good for Kunikida to have his rigid ways challenged a bit. “You’re excused,” he replies, waving a hand flippantly.

Yosano snorts. She appears to be the only spectator who’s properly enjoying the show.

Atsushi looks wildly perplexed by the scene, and Chuuya looks downright pained, twitching and blushing profusely - a rather interesting reaction, one that Dazai has to explore a little further.

“What do you think, Chuuya〜? I look quite dashing in these, don’t I?”

Chuuya gulps but doesn’t answer otherwise. Befuddlement radiates from him like the emotional equivalent of overcooked rice - sticky and useless.

Still, Dazai wants to stick his teeth in it. He lowers his chin and peers over the frames of the glasses. “Ah. Allow me to interpret your silence as agreement.”

Chuuya looks like he’s about to have a meltdown, eyes glassy and composure completely rumpled. He opens his mouth as though to answer but then closes it again, providing only more silence for Dazai to interpret.

Yosano erupts in a flurry of uncontrolled laughter.

“Okay, children, that's enough!” she concludes and steals the glasses of Dazai’s nose, “these are not safe for work, and I’m confiscating them.”

“I need those!” Kunikida screeches, face mantled with an annoyed flush.

“Oh right.” Yosano tosses them back at Kunikida who catches them in one hand, and immediately gets on the task of polishing the spectacle lenses with the edge of his sleeve.

“So,” he says once the glasses are clean and he has put them back on, “should we get on with the meeting. We’re already running behind schedule.”

He fixes his glasses one extra time and taps his foot in a very passive-aggressive way.

Dazai smiles pleasantly. “Yes, of course. And can I just say that it's very nice of you to wait for me before starting the meeting.”

“We had already started when you blasted in here like a water balloon.”

“Oh? And what was decided at the meeting?”

Kunikida’s strained expression doesn’t provide much by the way of a response, but Yosano jumps in to answer.

“Nothing much," she says, attention focused on the medical instrument in her hands. “We don't have any solid leads which can help us establish the identity of the thief, so we were kinda just waiting for you to show up - Chuuya-kun said you were busy sniffing out useful information.”

Dazai beams, pleasantly un-surprised to hear that the meeting hadn’t actually started without him.

“Chuuya would be right,” he says, “wanna hear about it?”

He places his elbows on the table and leans forward to balance his chin on top of his folded fingers. With his head tilted forward, his hair falls over his eyes, so that he can’t glimpse around properly to check that he has everyone's attention. Still, he knows that he does - can sense them watching him, and feel their shared awareness like small needles prickling his skin.

Chuuya sits down on the opposite side of the table, right in Dazai's constricted field of visions.

They lock eyes.

“Shoot. What have you got for us?” Chuuya says.

“I have a pretty good idea of where to find the thief. He’s not working alone - he’s Yakuza. I don’t know where the painting is, but my best guess is that they’ll try to sell it on the black market.”

“How do you know?”

Dazai shrugs. “Just a matter of deducing the motive.”

“The motive is always power with these guys,” Yosano says.

Dazai nods. “And in this case, power comes in the form of money.”

“Doesn’t it always?” Atsushi asks, tentative and soft.

Dazai shakes his head, amused. “Not at all. Only people who have no money would assume that wealth leads to power.”

“Oh,” Astsuih lets out, and Chuuya scowls at Dazai like he just said something wrong.

Dazai can’t think of what it would be; he’s just stating the facts.

“Anyway,” he declares unrepentantly, “neither one of the suspected criminal organizations does contract work, so stealing the painting wasn't a hire job. That means whoever stole it is still in possession of it. No demand for ransom money has been made, so they probably intend to put the painting up for auction on the black market.”

Kunikida studies Dazai with a measuring gaze. “If they’re trying to auction it away, wouldn't we have heard about it?”

Dazai raises an eyebrow, “black market transactions aren’t exactly publicly announced.”

“Well no, but... wouldn’t you know? Isn’t that the kind of thing you’d have heard about as a mafioso?”

Dazai sighs. It looks like he has to explain the workings of underground auctions.

“No, advertising in any way risks someone contacting the authorities. These types of things aren’t open events - You get an invite. If they’re smart, they make sure not to extend invitations to anyone who might be even remotely connected to the Port Mafia or even Yokohama. This particular auction is probably going to be targeted at dealers with foreign clients."

"What makes you say that?"

"With a painting as well known as The Great Wave, it’s unlikely that any Japanese person would be interested. What would a buyer do with it? Hang it in their lobby?"

"Well..."

"They can't display it to visitors without it being recognized as stolen, and no one's interested in owning a painting that has to be hidden away; kinda defeats much of the point of owning the art."

"That makes sense, but don't you think it would be recognised even outside of Japan?"

"Nah. At least in Europe and America, art enthusiasts are too busy caring about stolen Van Goghs to spare brain cells on anything else... anyway, I’m sure that once we find the thief, he can tell us where and when this auction takes place.”

“I’m not too sure about that. Isn’t it very against yakuza code to snitch?”

“It is; those with loose lips die first, they say," Dazai professes with a carefree smile painted on his face, "and yes most self-respecting yakuza would rather die than give up valuable information to an enemy. But that shouldn’t be a problem - I don’t think there’s a single hostage who wouldn’t talk if I ask the questions.”

Kunikida’s eyebrows draw together. “We don't approve of such methods in the ADA,” he hisses, a tumble of words forced out like a harsh wind.

Dazai tilts his head, innocent as a spring flower swaying in that wind. “What methods?”

“Whatever take-no-prisoners-approaches you mafia people take.”

“Oh, Kunikida-san” he sing-songs in a way that he knows sends jolts of irritation through the idealist’s body, ”it’s so easy to hide beneath a false veneer of morality.”

He pushes his hair out of his face, eyes boring into Kunikida like drills. “It’s much harder to accept that the line between right and wrong is as blurry as the line between good and bad.”

“I have a perfectly good grasp of good and bad,” Kunikida counters.

Dazai hums. “The Great Wave is a piece of artwork which represents Japanese history and culture. Wouldn’t it be *bad* if we failed to reclaim it?”

Kunikida’s right eye twitches. “Certainly.” he grits out, voice like steel, “it would be a great loss, and the agency will do everything in our power to get the painting back.”

He leans forwards, and even while sitting his presence has a towering quality - one that’s probably supposed to inspire respect, but Dazai isn’t inclined to take Kunikida very seriously; he mostly finds the man amusing.

“However,” Kuikida says and the word sits heavy in the room, a promise and a warning, “I’m not allowing you to further your own agenda. The ADA will stay out of Mafia business, and this operation will be run completely on our terms. You're free to help us if you please, but if you do, you are very last in command. Understood?”

Dazai shakes his head. “I think we misunderstand each other. I’m here as a representative for Mori cooperation; an entirely *legal* business.”

Kunikida looks unimpressed. “Which just happens to be intrinsically related to the Port Mafia; the very *illegal* underbelly of this city.”

Dazai lifts his shoulder in a half-shrug. “Let’s not focus on our differences. As long as we have a common agenda, I’m sure our partnership will work out splendidly. Also, who’s to say that your way of doing things clashes with my way of doing things? You haven’t even heard what kind of approach I was going to suggest?”

Kunikida, being his merry icicle self, lifts his chin in challenge. “And what were you going to suggest?”

Dazai beams. “So glad you asked! I was going to propose a very simple plan, actually: One, we find the location of the painting, and two, we take it back as discreetly as possible. No casualties, no blackmail, no violence or coercion of any kind.”

Kunikida blinks, slow and heavy with something that looks like surprise. “That sounds… good, actually.”

He appears unwilling to admit it, but he does, so Dazai counts it as a win.

“Doesn’t it? Things tend to sail along quite smoothly once everyone agrees to just follow my plan and accept that I'm always right.”

Chuuya clears his throat, “Let me get this straight,” he says, “you think we can find the thief and get him to tell us where the painting is being stored just like that.”

“Well, no. Not *just like that*, but it’s possible.”

“And then we’ll- what? Just walk into a black market auction and take it without anyone noticing?”

“That’s the gist of it, yes.”

“This needs to be a bigger operation,” Kunikida says, words coming out through stress-clenched teeth, “we’ll need to make sure that everyone involved in the illegal art trade is handed over to the authorities and t-”

“No,” Dazai cuts in, unable to listen to any more nonsense.

“All we need to do is find The Great Wave and retrieve it.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. We at least have to bring in the ability-user who stole the painting. If we don’t, he can just come back and do it again, disguised as someone else!”

“That's not the point. Japan is full of ability users strong or savvy enough to rob a museum… look at Chuuya, who would stop him if he tried, huh?”

He gestures towards Chuuya who’s flushing and looking overall rather bashful at the acknowledgement. It’s adorable, and Dazai nearly forgets about the conversation he’s trying to take part in until Kunikida’s voice brings him out of his little daze.

“But we can’t just let the criminals go free!”

Dazai refrains from rolling his eyes at the meaningless moralistic drivel. “Listen,” he says, slow and controlled, “this is nothing more than a power game, and it’s best fought covertly. The responsible yakuza group is trying to infiltrate our territory, and all we need to do is send the message that they won’t get away with it. They’re gutsy, but not dumb - if we recover the painting they won’t try to steal it again.”

Kunikida scowls, but he must be sympathetic to the line of logic because he yields with a nod.

“So,” Chuuya says, “where do we find the motherfucker who stole the painting?”

“Language!” Kunikida reprimands. Chuuya just brushes him off, eyes still trained on Dazai.

“The drug investigation helped me narrow down the search area to central Tokyo,” Dazai informs, and then pauses for dramatic effect. He takes a deep breath and then continues in his best storytelling-voice. “From the profile we created of the culprit, we know, amongst other things, that he owns a dog. The dog treat that fell out of his pocket indicates that he likes to take it to places where it's allowed to walk unleashed - if it was on a leash he wouldn’t need to motivate it with treats to get it to come when called.”

Chuuya smiles, seemingly understanding where it's all going. "And how many dog parks are there in Tokyo?"

"There's only one in central Tokyo, Inu Paradaisu. I assume that's where he walks his dog. I was hoping to go there tomorrow morning and wait for him; he's bound to come out with his dog at some point during the day."

"Okay, and what are we looking for? Do you know what he looks like?"

"No, but we know that he's left-handed and we know that he has a white dog."

Dazai turns to face Atsushi. "Did you have a sniff of the dog hair Chuuya brought in, Atsushi-kun?"

Atsushi perks up when spoken to. "I did," he states eagerly, "it's a small dog. Smells like a Bichon Havanese to me. It's a young, under a year - still smells like a puppy."

"Ah wonderful, a left-hander with a white Bichon puppy - Should be easy enough to find," Dazai beams.

"So, who wants to come with me to do the stakeout at the park?" he asks, looking around the table and fluttering his eyelashes enticingly at the ADA members. He lets his gaze rest just a little longer on Chuuya.

Atsushi raises his hand. "I'd lik-"

"I'LL DO IT," Chuuya cuts him off, and all eyes in the room immediately turn to him. He clears his throat a couple of times. "I'll do it," he repeats at a more controlled volume.

Dazai snickers. "So sweet of you to volunteer Chuuya. Meet you by the entrance to the park tomorrow morning?"

"Sure."

"It opens at 8 am. Don't be late. Oh and I've checked the forecast, it's supposed to be sunny, so bring sunglasses."

Chuuya scoffs. "*You* have the nerve to tell *me* not to be late?"

Dazai answers with a wink, and then stands up from his seat and gives a bow. "Is that it for today's meeting then?"

Yosano stretches. "Yup," she says around a yawn, "I declare the meeting adjourned. It's time for a drink. Where have you hid the wine this time, Kunikida-kun?" she inquires, looking at Kunikida with pleading eyes, but Kunikida huffs and shakes his head, refusing to answer.

"I found it earlier," Chuuya answers for him. "It's in the staff kitchen, under the sink. Get me a glass too?"

“Of course,” Yosano answers as she gets up and struts off towards the kitchen. “See you around, Dazai-kun," she calls over her shoulder.

Dazai waves at her and spins on his heel, ready to exit with fanfare.

“Oi,” he hears Kunikida call after him.

Dazai turns, “yes?”

Kunikida eyes dart between Dazai and Chuuya like a ping pong ball, worried frown stuck on his face. A grimace characteristic of a control freak who isn’t entirely in control of the situation. “Remember to report back as soon as you’ve found the thief and questioned him, okay?”

“Yes, sir!” Dazai answers with a salute while Chuuya nods perfunctorily.

Dazai returns to the storage room to get his belongings and then exits the ADA's offices with a cheery, "bye-bye friends!"

He’s fully committed to the idea of taking the stairs down, but when he rounds the corner, his path is blocked by a large cleaning cart. A middle-aged man dressed in grey is busy mopping the stairs. He’s standing with his back to Dazai, and he's wearing large headphones, swaying his hips to music which Dazai can’t hear, but from the rhythm of the man's movements, he assumes it's an upbeat tune.

He doesn’t feel like alerting the man to his presence, so with a muffled sigh that’s barely even there, he goes back and presses the call button for the elevator.

The elevator arrives promptly, squeaking and creaking all the way. As its doors open, Dazai is floored by the disgusting miasma that emanates from the hell box.

He wrinkles his nose, but bravely steps inside and presses the button for the ground floor. He only hopes that the stench won’t cling to his borrowed clothes and follow him home.

That’s when he hears the creaking of a door and hurried steps.

A second later Chuuya glides into the elevator, barely making it before the doors close.

“Oh, Chuuya, what are you doing here. What about the wine?”

“The wine can wait.”

Dazai scratches his cheek, staring at Chuuya through hooded eyes. “Really? Are you okay?”

It isn’t like Chuuya to pass on wine.

“I...” Chuuya trails off, words getting swallowed by silence.

There’s a single light bulb hanging from the top of the old elevator, and it shines with a dim indifference, not bothering to illuminate the space fully.

Chuuya's face looks secretive, even mysterious, covered half by shadows, but mysteries aside, Dazai thinks he knows what Chuuya wants.

His lips are parted like a velvet curtain about to be drawn - but nothing happens, they're just stuck there in a limbo of anticipation, and Dazai gets the feeling that if he doesn't do something soon, the finely-wrought moment will pass like it never happened.

Feeling like he's moving through a dim haze of heat, slow and gooey, he leans forward, grasping at the heels of something that he doesn't want to be left behind by. And apparently setting the wheels into motion, slow as they may be, is enough to propel Chuuya into action too: he lunches forward with a recklessness that's very on-brand for him and crashes into Dazai's lips with a violent force.

The back of Dazai's head hits the cold elevator wall with a *clunk*, and the wind is pushed out of his lungs.

He lets out a gasp that Chuuya swallows greedily, pushing closer up against him until they're slotted together like two pieces of the same thing - Dazai's hands in Chuuya's hair and Chuuya hands… seemingly *everywhere*.

In the back of his mind, Dazai registers that the elevator isn't moving. Did he press the stop button? Did Chuuya? Why can't Dazai remember anything all of a sudden?

All that seems to matter is Chuuya's lips against his own.

Chuuya's kiss is like a warm liquidy substance, and he selfishly wants to steal all of that warmth; to keep kissing until he has swallowed enough of heat to pacify the cold emptiness inside.

He moves a hand down to Chuuya's neck and tightens the grip, bending Chuuya's head back to deepen the kiss. And Chuuya goes along with every move like the perfect dance partner, tilting his head back and meeting him halfway in a mess of too much desperation and too little coordination.

Dazai draws back for a second to take a ragged breath, vision spotting from the lack of oxygen. There's a string of saliva hanging like a thin thread between them, and that should be disgusting, but mostly Dazai finds it fascinating.

He isn't given a second to recover before Chuuya is on his neck, sucking and biting at the skin just above his bandages.

A fire pools in Dazai's stomach, and yes this is what it feels like to be warm. The overwhelm of the senses, just like fire, can be destructive as well as purifying and Dazai can't decide if he's about to be utterly obliterated or cleansed, but he finds that he doesn't care much.

"You drive me fucking crazy," Chuuya growls, frustration bristling with the same kind of warmth that reverberates through Dazai's bones - like a fire in the sunset. "It's unfair that you look so good in my sweater… and with the fucking glasses. I can't-"

“Oh yes, you liked that didn’t you,” Dazai says, tone light with laughter, and fingers digging into Chuuya’s shoulders.

Chuuya answers by shoving his thigh up between Dazai's legs, adding much-appreciated pressure even through the layers of clothing between them.

Dazai’s vision is blurring around the edges and he can’t feel his body. He feels weak, but it isn’t a bad feeling at all, it’s like floating at the very edge of the universe.

The elevator suddenly jerks into motion, and the abrupt motion has Chuuya falling forwards, pressing hard up against Dazai.

He lets out a little groan and then leans back to look at Dazai with dewy eyes and blown out pupils. “But I hate seeing you in Atsushi-kun’s clothing,” he mutters.

Dazai giggles, but it is muffled by a gasp when Chuuya leans forward to nip at Dazai’s neck again. His breath is ghosting over Dazai’s pulse point like it’s a weak spot that he wants to ram a knife through.

“Yes, do it,” Dazai purrs, “mark your territory.”

Chuuya does as he’s told.

It’s hot and wet, and Dazai's breath is pushed out of his mouth around a soft moan. The way Chuuya’s knees buckle slightly in response to the sound is the most rewarding thing. Dazai wants to create a mental list of all the noises that make Chuuya wild; wants to tailor every single one of his moves to make Chuuya desperate.

Dazai isn’t sure that he has ever felt as alive as he does, trapped in between Chuuya’s arms, under the faint light that pours down on them, illuminating a single drop of sweat on Chuuya’s forehead that’s oddly appealing.

The stench of the old elevator mixes with the intense smell of untamed desire, and it's overwhelming. Dazai lets himself go pliant; limp and receptive. It’s an uncharacteristic response for him, which Chuuya must notice cause he pulls back just slightly, breath still ghosting against Dazai’s skin, eyes twinkling with something bright and lively like a hot and humid summer night spent stargazing.

“This is okay, right?” Chuuya asks, and Dazai’s about to answer that it’s more than okay, but then there’s a shrill ping reverberating through the cramped space and the doors open.

And that isn’t okay at all.

Dazai looks up, staring into the brown elevator ceiling like it’s a starry night sky that goes on endlessly. How far away the non-present stars seem…

He reaches for Chuuya’s gloved hand and raises it to his lips. “I think it's time to say goodbye. See you tomorrow, Chu-chu.” He kisses Chuuya’s hand and keeps eye contact all the while doing it, peeking at Chuuya through his lashes and thoroughly enjoying the way Chuuya’s breath trembles on the exhale.

Dazai spins around and walks off, throwing a hand up and waving it over his shoulder. “Adieu - mon petite détective,” he trills, and there’s a strangled laugh coming from Chuuya, a sweet sound that seems to come from deep inside his chest.

“À bientôt grand mafia.”

Chapter End Notes

I decided to give my glasses fetish to Chuuya… don’t look at me like that, it’s not that weird. Anyway, this whole fic is just going to be me giving Dazai all my problems and Chuuya all my kinks 😅
As for next update. I only have an outline and I’m the slowest writer ever. Just getting out of bed and brushing my teeth every day is bordering on being too much for me. Everything takes forever with me :/ I'll try my very best to work just a little faster than my usual snail pace.

Come say hi on twitter or tumblr. Litterally talk to me anytime about anything, I'd love to make more friends in the fandom.

If you liked this chapter, please leave a comment and let me know 💖 You'll win my entire heart if you do 💖💖💖

P.S. If you're looking for reading recs, have a look through my bookmarks. I've bookmarked some of my favourites :)

6. A walk in the park (a place where roses bloom)

Chapter Summary

Mind tricks and hypnosis...
And a tiny lil bit of Dazai being Chuuya's sugardaddy ;)

Chapter Notes

Hiiiii

Hope everyone is doing well! happy chuu-day, so proud of myself for uploading on Chuuya's birthday (although this isn't a birthday fic so... it counts for nothing)

Thank you so SO much for reading, giving kudos and commenting, I know I'm repeating myself, but it really means the world to me and I can't tell you how much I appreciate it<3

Chapter warnings:
Slightly disordered eating habits

Chapter notes:
- Yokai: a class of supernatural monsters, spirits, and demons in Japanese folklore.
- Bishamon: a Buddhist deity
- Tobi: Flying

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dazai walks back to his apartment. It's still raining but not violently so, and his place is only a couple of blocks away. The rain is so pretty, it falls silently, not as individual drops, but as a coherent sheath that resembles the dancing dust particles in a sunlit room.

And Dazai doesn't like a lot of things, but he does appreciate beauty, and he doesn't mind the rain's cold wetness as long as he knows it will soon be replaced by a bath's *warm* wetness.

He lives on the top floor of an unwelcoming apartment building in the Minato Mirai district. There's a garden that's almost big enough to be a park surrounding the building. Aesthetically, the garden is on the minimalist side, but its trees and bushes smell very extravagant.

Dazai takes in a deep breath enjoying the mellowness of the red pine trees.

He walks through the reception area, greeting the doorman politely and heading straight for the glass elevator which takes him all the way to his penthouse.

A deep breath, a rush of oxygen and then a slow exhale.

He locates his keys amongst his other belongings which have been tossed haphazardly into the plastic bag along with his heavy rain-soaked clothing.

The door unlocks, and he disables the alarm before stepping into the genkan.

----*RAM*----

The door slams hard behind him.

Which is hardly surprising, considering it's a heavy thing made up of hard steel and aluminium. It shuts too harshly, shuts too fast, and always strikes through the silence of Dazai's apartment at a volume that serves as a rude reminder of how bored he is with his 'home'.

The act of arriving home is an eerie one. One he likes to avoid as much as he can - he much prefers spending his free time at Bar Lupin or crashing at Kouyou's.

He toes out of his shoes and drops the bag on the floor.

Pictures are lining the walls of the entry hall, manga-inspired, flat-looking art with loud colours and smooth lines.

He moves into the living room. It's big and square and could easily fit 40 people. It's rare that anyone aside from Dazai is in there though.

It's just Dazai and his furniture. The long black couch, the built-in fireplace, the bookcases filled with poetry books he acquired on a whim but never reads. The grand piano that he never finds the time to play and the floor to ceiling windows, which are covered with motorized drapes.

He heads toward the round coffee table and grabs the remote.

The TV comes alive with beautiful images of exotic fish (its default station is set to a nature documentary channel because Dazai loves pretty scenery captured in cinematography, but hates just about everything else modern television has to offer).

For a little while, Dazai loses himself in the activity of staring at the fish as they swim around in their bright, beautiful underwater garden of corals.

Then suddenly, the image changes to a big shark with rows upon rows of teeth and small needlelike, *empty* eyes. Dazai quickly averts his gaze.

He runs a hand through his hair, sets the remote back on the table and then shuffles across the floor, through the hallway and into the master bedroom.

His closet is terribly disorganised, so it's with some difficulty that he combs through the mess to find something that’s both presentable and comfortable enough to wear without having a meltdown. In the end, he succeeds, emerging from the closet with a soft pair of black trousers and a loose-fitting white shirt.

There’s an old turntable record player perched up on a shelf; around it, a few LPs lay available for play, and next to it stands a vase with half-withered flowers.

Dazai picks a record, lowers it onto the platter and then positions the tonearm above the beginning of the record.

The needle drops, and a sleepy trumpet solo starts out on a bed of solo piano glissandos.

The melody picks up, whisking Dazai up in its arms and taking him for a slow, dreamy twirl.

🎵 *Quand il me prend dans ses bras, Il me parle tout bas, Je vois la vie en rose* 🎵

He sits down on his bed and closes his eyes for a second, listening to the apartment's haunting silence, which buzzes louder than the background tv noise and the french music from the late 40s.

He sighs, and the sound mixes with the silence and the music; clings to the walls, echoes endlessly like a whispering ghost.

Furniture and gadgets aren’t friends, and regardless of how he fills his living space, the apartment as a whole seems colourless and silent. That’s Dazai’s home, and yes, the act of coming home is an eerie one.

He moves into the bathroom, wincing at the cold granite tiles against his feet. There’s floor heating, but he always forgets to turn it on, so it serves little purpose other than being an annoying missed opportunity.

He artfully avoids looking into the mirror over the wall length countertop and moves straight for the tub. He runs a bath, making sure to drop his biggest and pinkest bath bomb into the water before undressing.

While soaking in the cotton-candy-pink water, he gets his phone out and shoots a few messages - asking a few favours from a mafia intelligence officer: requesting a car and booking a room at The Stray Dogs Park Hotel in Tokyo for Shuji Tsushima.

Getting out of the bath is always a terrible experience: the dumb cold tiles seem to be made of ice cubes, water everywhere, the complete overwhelm of having to wipe the water off the bathroom floor.

Drying himself off is a monumental task too. Slow and tedious; he doesn't like the rough feel of the towel against his bare skin one bit, but he deals with it. When he's dry, he applies new bandages before getting dressed.

He then packs a light travel bag for the Tokyo-trip before taking off into the early evening.

『O』

The early morning sun is very kind on Tokyo, hugging the city in a soft hazy light that envelops everything in an orange glow and makes the dew that covers the ground sparkle like diamonds.

The day hasn't quite started for the masses, the street lights are still on and they shine like smudged stars through the mist. The air is still thick with the humidity of night, clinging to the last bits of darkness like an oversleeper might cling to their duvet. Not that Dazai can relate at all. He's a notorious insomniac and sleep never clings to him in any meaningful way - just haunts him during the day like an unwelcome shadow.

Still, despite the ever-present burden of wakefulness, Dazai finds that he's in a rather pleasant mood - he appreciates the fact that he gets to behold the age-old ritual of sunrise two days in a row. If he keeps this up he might turn into a diurnal being sometime soon.

Everything about Chuuya is loud, and so, it isn't really surprising that Dazai hears him before he sees him.

"GET AWAY FROM ME YOU GARBAGE-EATING PIECE OF KFDSBFH."

Dazai spins around and is greeted by the delightful vision of Chuuya being assaulted by a crow; they dance around in a wonderful mix of red and black.

Chuuya is carrying a muffin and a little brown paper bag in one hand, and a cup holder with two cups in the other. The bird seems to be very interested in the muffin, but Chuuya uses gravity to push it away.

"Okay, fucker. You're asking for it," he sneers, and then the bird takes on a deep red glow, becoming completely engulfed by Chuuya's ability.

The bird seems confused, flapping its wings feebly.

Then Chuuya lifts the hand that he holds the muffin in, and points a finger as though it's the barrel of a gun.

"Peeew," he says and flicks his hand in imitation of a firing gun. The crow shoots off like a bullet. It's hurled at least 5 feet up in the air before the red glow around it dissipates, and as it does, the bird stretches its wings and flies off - clearly admitting defeat.

Dazai snorts at the scene. "Poor bird. You need to work on your anger issues."

Chuuya huffs. "Since when do you give a shit about animal rights."

"Since always. I like animals more than humans."

"That doesn't surprise me… anyway, that dumb bird tried to steal my breakfast, so it had it coming." He takes an unnecessarily big bite of his breakfast muffin as though to make a

point, and if nothing else, Dazai admires the unapologetic-ness of it.

The gloved hand that carries the cup-holder stretches forward toward Dazai. One of the paper cups has Dazai's name written on it.

Next to his name is a little heart.

Dazai is entirely convinced that Chuuya didn't ask the barista to draw the little heart, but he did buy the coffee and that in itself is kind of... heartfelt.

So Dazai accepts the coffee like it's a box of chocolates on valentines day, chin lowered and lashes fluttering.

"Thank you~ that's too much, Chuuya."

Chuuya blinks. "It's just coffee," he says, making it sound like a noncommittal shrug, "thought maybe you'd be less moody with sugar and caffeine in your system."

Dazai purses his lips, a rejoinder sitting right on his lips, but it dies immediately, as he's not in the mood for petty arguments.

He lifts the cup to his lips as though to kiss the plastic lid, taking a tentative sip to check both the temperature and the glucose index.

It's the perfect temperature and also perfectly sweet; overflowing with milk and sugar.

He takes another, bigger, sip: Hot and sweet - poised against the beautiful morning and Chuuya's warm presence.

"Hungry?" Chuuya asks, lifting the little brown paper bag in his hand. "I bought you a blueberry muffin."

Dazai shakes his head, and Chuuya makes a somewhat displeased face, but whatever his misgivings are, he doesn't voice them.

At 8 am sharp, a park employee approaches the gates to open the park for the public.

The sun has steadily crept higher up the sky, standing proudly over the tall rooftops that surround the park, beating down on the flower enclosed gravel paths at a sharp angle - shining as though it has nothing to be sad about.

Dazai observes the few passing faces of dog-owners who are out on an early morning stroll. He reads their movements like a lioness reading a herd of gazelles, taking in all the little details and sorting through them with lightning speed.

Chuuya walks close to Dazai, but not uncomfortably so - just like the silence they share seems companionable rather than uncomfortable.

Dazai has the passing thought that he should compliment Chuuya on his unique ability to *not* make things uncomfortable.

He doesn't, though. The silence is too sweet, and the right words are too hard to find.

They stop by a little pond in the middle of the park. It's surrounded by bamboo, and across it, there's a wooden bridge.

"Do you mind if I eat the muffin?" Chuuya asks, breaking the silence.

"It's yours. Do with it what you want."

"But I bought it for you and it-"

"Just eat it Chuuya," Dazai interrupts, unwilling to listen to the breakfast propaganda. He gets enough of that kind of discourse from Kouyou.

Chuuya gives another displeased look but doesn't argue back (unless the aggressive way in which he takes the muffin and shoves a big bite into his mouth counts as an argument).

"How long do you think this operation will take?" he then asks, "I brought a change of clothes but..."

"I don't know when the auction is planned for, but I think it will be sometime soon. They probably don't wanna sit on it for too long… today's what?" Dazai says distractedly as they step onto the bridge.

"Friday," Chuuya answers automatically - as though the fact that Dazai can't keep track of the days doesn't surprise him at all.

They stop at the middle of the bridge, and Dazai leans over the railing to look down at the water.

"Hmm. Your *one* change of clothes works out perfectly then," Dazai asserts, "Saturday's are big auction days."

The gentle breeze grips the water and twists it to little swirls with churning peaks. It's subtle and haunting - Dazai can't look away. He can feel the water's movements in his body, sense his brain-cells firing in synchrony with the rippling motion. It creates a pleasant sensation that spreads through the back of his skull and helps him gather his thoughts. He could probably stare at the water's graceful movements for hours.

"Oi, Dazai." Chuuya jabs. "Are you even paying attention? We're here on a stake-out, remember?"

Dazai hesitates a moment to answer because he's busy looking at a particularly enticing ripple interference pattern, which reminds him of the repetitive predictability of human behaviour - well most humans anyway.

“Hey?” Chuuya prods. “Are you there? You're doing that thing where you go blank. Is the existential angst getting a little too heavy for you?”

Dazai wants to laugh, but he knows that it isn’t meant as a joke. He also knows that it isn’t the time to delve into a discussion about his passively introspective moods. Instead, he tears himself away from the mesmerizing water patterns that his eyes seem to want to stick to like glue.

“Calm down. He won’t be here for another… 30 minutes or so.” Dazai says offhandedly, turning around to lean against the railing, “and honestly, Chuuya, if I thought he was just about to show his face, I would have suggested that we stay by the gates and keep watch for him.”

“Oh. Right… that makes sense,” Chuuya scratches the bag of his head, somewhat discomposed.

“Wait. How’d you know when he’ll be here?”

Dazai slowly turns his head to give Chuuya a look - a look which he hopes properly communicates that it’s rude to ask a magician to reveal their tricks. “It’s just a guess,” he says, purposefully vague, “a correct guess.”

Chuuya purses his lips, undelighted but still so pretty. Dazai remembers the taste of those lips vividly, the memory has been imprinted into the back of his skull with a permanent marker.

“Don’t look so sour,” he says and attempts an aloof smile.

“Don’t be so secretive,” Chuuya shoots back. “Seriously, though. Why are we here already if you know our guy won’t show up for another 30 minutes? We could have checked into a hotel room or something... ordered room service.”

“Still hungry?” Dazai asks, eyeing the almost-eaten muffin in Chuuya’s hand.

Chuuya throws the last bit into his mouth and swallows it after chewing on it a few times. “Well, no. Not really. I just really like those fancy hotel breakfasts.”

“I see,” Dazai says, although he doesn’t really. Breakfast isn’t one of his weaknesses. “Anway, I already checked us into The Stray Dogs Park Hotel. I arrived last night - wanted to put a few feelers into the streets to see if anyone had heard anything that might be of interest.”

Chuuya’s eyes turn to saucers. “*What?* ” he screeches, “you booked me a room too? I’m on a tight budget! The ADA can’t afford to send us on expensive business trips like that. There’s no way I can afford staying there.”

Dazai dismisses Chuuya’s worries with a wave of his hand. “Don't worry about it, It’s on me. You just said you like fancy hotel breakfasts, what better place to get those than a fancy hotel?”

“What? No? I mean, no! I can’t accept that.”

“You can, and you will. We have to stay at the same place. We don’t have time to move back and forth between hotels.”

“Right... Okay.”

“I’m sure you can find a way to repay me.” Dazai winks just as the breeze takes hold of his hair and tosses it around. He hopes it looks attractive rather than messy.

Chuuya is wearing a certain look, glimmering challenge bright on his face.

“Oh, that's how it is? You expect something in return?” The tone of his voice is teetering a fine balance between playful and accusatory.

“Nah, my generosity is free,” Dazai says, cause it’s the right thing to say. And then, to uphold his reputation and to attempt this thing called honesty, he adds: "Wouldn’t complain if you *decided* to repay me, though.”

Chuuya hums. “We’ll see.”

If he’s aiming for a cryptic tone, he’s failing tremendously. Chuuya isn’t the type to accept anything without giving back tenfold.

Dazai smiles. “Now let me fill you in on my plan. Need to prepare you for the part you’re going to play.”

“Okay, that’s good. Don’t think I didn’t notice that you never actually explained how you’d get the information out of the thief once we find him... So, what's the plan?”

Dazai considers for a moment, looks at Chuuya, takes in his curious expression and then says: “mind-control.” He states it as casually as the wind takes hold of Chuuya’s hair, as simply as the clear sky reflects blue in Chuuya’s eyes - like its nothing, the wind, the sky.

Chuuya’s expression switches, features dropping into something resembling disbelief. “You can’t be serious.”

Dazai laughs easily. “I never lie.”

“Now, that’s just not tru-”

“Shh.” Dazai intones, lifting a finger to his lips. “We’ll do to him what he did to poor Kaneko Yuuto. No drugs though, I don't need someone to be under the influence of something to hypnotise them.”

Chuuya blinks owlishly, surprise and horror shining like little pearls in his eyes. The idea that someone as strong as Chuuya should be so horrified by something so simple as mind-tricks amuses Dazai endlessly.

“Don’t worry Chuuya, it’s not as hocus-pocus as it sounds, and he won’t suffer a single bit. We already know that he’s superstitious, and those types of people tend to be highly suggestible; they're *very* responsive to verbal cues and fall into hypnosis fast and easily.”

“Are you just going to go up to him and dangle a pendulum in front of his eyes?”

“No, I was actually going to convince him that I'm a psychic.”

Chuuya takes a huge sip of his coffee, tossing it back as though it's a shot of whisky. “For fuck’s sake, Dazai. This plan is completely bonkers.”

“It’s a splendid plan,” Dazai argues softly, going sweet around the edges, a timid smile on his lips and head tilted like a dog. Convincing Chuuya with mildness rather than real arguments.

Chuuya scratches his chin and looks at Dazai - looks right through him, maybe - gaze blank for a moment, but then it refocuses, the blue of his eyes becoming vivid again.

“It’s a dumb-ass plan, but I trust you, so let’s do this.”

Dazai’s stomach does a weird thing, and all of a sudden it’s as though his organs have been replaced with feathers. Light and fluffy.

“Cool,” he says, and his voice only comes out a little wobbly, “so here’s what will happen.” He steps closer to Chuuya as though he’s about to reveal a great secret.

“When we find him, I need you to hide behind a tree. Come out on my signal. Act like you don’t know me - you’re just out for a walk in the park.”

“Okay,” Chuuya says in an almost whisper, leaning a little closer, so they’re only inches apart. It really does feel like sharing secrets even if they’re just talking strategy.

Dazai’s train of thought is derailed for a second. “Okay,” he repeats dumbly, but then chokes down the confusion, “I mean- and then I’ll ask you some questions and make some predictions about you. All you have to do is look marvelled at my amazing psychic abilities, and confirm that everything I say is true!”

Chuuya flashes a thumbs up. “And then what?”

“And then, hopefully, I'll have my authority established in his eyes - he’ll let me talk to him and lure him into a state where he’s willing to share information.”

Dazai fishes out his phone from his back pocket to check the time. “He’ll be here soon. We should pick a better spot to hide.”

“Right,” Chuuya says, quickly turning and marching off the bridge, a determined stroll that Dazai, despite his long legs, struggles to keep up with.

Near the entrance, they find a sufficiently thick oak tree to hide behind.

Dazai slides down into the grass and lets his head fall back against the trunk of the tree.

“Hey. Don't be a lazy shit,” Chuuya jabs, “I’m not doing all the work. You have to be on the lookout too.”

“Chuuya is giving me a headache by being so loud,” Dazai shoots back, rolling his eyes for dramatic effect.

Still, he’s in a cooperative mood, so he does turn his body to be able to peek out from behind the tree.

A rush of colours and shapes whirl through the gates. Small people with big and muscular dogs, tall people with mini poodles and everything in between.

People (and dog) watching is an interesting pastime - something that Dazai gets an unexpected kind of pleasure out of. Observing these ‘normal people’ with their ‘normal lives’, and trying, but failing, to understand what it must be like.

He’s particularly amused by an angry little chihuahua with a very confrontational streak. It growls and barks at everything that moves.

“Oh look, Chuuya, that’s you,” he comments, which earns him a light smack to the back of his head.

Dazai tilts his head at an angle and turns to look at Chuuya with big, wet, disappointed eyes. “Aw. Chuuya is so violent. I think I might be concussed,” he whines and pouts with all the finesse of a spoiled child, but makes sure to keep his voice low so they don’t attract attention.

Chuuya opens his mouth as though to answer but then seems to get distracted by something.

Dazai follows Chuuya's gaze.

There’s a man by the entrance, dressed in black jeans and a very familiar-looking velvet jacket. He appears to be in his twenties, is of a slender build and has charcoal black hair.

He crouches down, next to a small fluffy white dog that’s wagging its tail from side to side like it's a propeller.

He clips the leash off with his left hand, and as soon as the dog is free, it sprints off towards a little flock of sparrows further down the path.

“O-ho, Bishamon, come here,” the man calls.

The dog barks at the birds a single time and watches as they take off into the sky, creating a grey and brown, diffused firework. It then spins around and sprints back towards its owner.

“Good girl,” he says and reaches into his pocket. A second later, he bends forward to reward the dog with something, which Dazai assumes is a dog treat.

Chuuya leans a little closer to Dazai. “That’s our guy,” he whispers.

Dazai agrees. “No doubt about it. Now, let’s lure him into our little trap. Ready?”

“I was born ready.”

“We’ll wait for him to pass and then I'll run after him. You just stay here and wait for my signal, okay?”

Chuuya agrees with a single curt nod, eyes still trained on the culprit and his dog.

As soon as the man has passed their hiding spot, Dazai pulls away from the tree trunk in a fluid movement and stalks after him.

“Sir! Wait a second please,” Dazai catches up to the man and slides in, in front of him, so that he can keep an eye on Chuuya who’s still spying behind the tree.

“Oh. Um? Can I help you,” the man says, puzzled look on his face mixing with apprehension like some ambiguous modernist painting. He's leaning back at an awkward angle in what is probably an unconscious attempt to put more space between himself and Dazai.

The dog too is gawking at Dazai with its curious puppy-eyes. Dazai stares back at it with a clear non-verbal command in his gaze: *Sit, Fido! And stay until I’m done with your owner.*

The dog seems to understand on an intuitive level cause it sits promptly.

Dazai reaches out a hand and takes a firm grab of the man’s arm, not unpleasant, just strong and authoritative.

“I could sense you from miles away, my friend. I’m very worried about you.”

The man's eyes flicker with a subtle form of worry. “What are you talking about? Do I know you?”

“Ah, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Kato Tobi, and I’m a spiritual medium. I do all sorts of things from clairvoyance to fortune-telling. It’s a family tradition. You see, my grandmother was abducted by yokais when she was just a little girl. They took her right leg and her left eye, but in exchange, they gave her the power to communicate with the spirit world. She has passed on her skill to her children and grandchildren.”

“Oh, really?” the man says, and although there’s interest in his tone, there’s also mild scepticism. “That’s fascinating, but I’m not looking to have my fortune read.”

Dazai’s hand is still clutching the man's arm, and he squeezes it lightly. “Oh, but you do. I can sense the spirits following you. *They’re angry*.”

Dazai leans closer, keeping eye contact and then whispers: “They’re telling me that you’ve taken something that isn’t yours.”

“W-what? I don’t know what you are talking about?” the man says but the way his brow furrows speaks of guilt.

“Don’t you?" Dazai asks, knowing tilt to his chin, "Can’t you feel the raging spirits around you? Their lingering presence? Their malignity?”

The way the man's pupils constrict with fear is pretty amusing. Dazai has to concentrate not to smile (Kouyou has told him that it's rude to smile at others' misfortune).

"Ah-a." Dazai purrs, "you *can* feel it. I can sense your unease. It's opaque and purple and floats around you like a dim aura."

"I… you can't possibly know about... this can't be real." He shakes his head as though to clear his thoughts - as though Dazai standing in front of him might just be an illusion.

Dazai quickly lets his eyes dart toward the tree that serves as a hiding spot and gives a small nod of his head to signal Chuuya to come out.

He looks back at the man, "I can promise you that I'm the real deal, Mr… what's your name?"

"Yukio Mishima."

"Mishima-kun, let me prove to you that my psychic abilities are real, and once I've done that, you'll let me talk to you about what it is you've done to upset the spirits."

"I don't kno-"

"Oh, look at that cute redhead," Dazai cuts in, pointing at Chuuya who's walking up towards them, "why don't I illustrate my clairvoyant skills on this young man?"

Dazai waves a hand of Chuuya. "Yu-hoo, there! I'm a real and honest psychic, mind if I give you a reading? It's completely free."

Chuuya, who's a miserable actor, comes to an abrupt standstill. There's a fake baffled look plastered on his face.

"Who me?" He points to himself looking neither surprised nor unassuming, but the act, all though terrible, doesn't seem to tip-off Mishima who's looking at Chuuya with wide and earnest eyes.

Dazai waves his hand around a little more, cause he has seen self-proclaimed psychics do such a thing; they tend to be very buoyant in their movements and a little loose in their mannerisms - something that's easy enough to copy.

"Yes, you sir," Dazai beams, "what's your name."

"Ch-"

"NO WAIT." Dazai lifts a hand, almost slapping Chuuya in the face, "let me ask the spirits and have them tell me..."

Dazai narrows his eyes and stares into the distance like he's trying to make out something far away.

“Ah,” he mutters, “I’m sensing an unusual name… something strong… hmm, there are a lot of spirits around right now. They really seem to like you; you have a very calming effect on them - you must have a very pure heart. Hmm… let’s see if one of them wants to tell me your name.”

Dazai lifts his arms over his head, bends at the elbows and places his fingers on his skull as though they’re little electrodes, which might help him infuse his brain with the right energy to soak up spiritual signals. “it’s… something like… Chuuya?”

Chuuya gasps and slaps a hand over his mouth. “That’s incredible," he says through his fingers, "how’d you know?”

He still puts too much effort into the act - it’s cute but borders on being unconvincing.

Dazai shifts his eyes to Mishima to check that the man is paying attention and falling for the trick. He appears to be well impressed, eyes round and unblinking, mouth slightly dropped.

Good.

“Now, Chuuya,” Dazai says. “If you don’t mind, I’ll try and have the spirits tell me one of your best-kept secrets. Is that okay?”

“Yeah,” Chuuya agrees, a little too willingly - he really shouldn't seem so excited at the prospect of a supposed stranger looking into his deepest darkest secret like they were an open book. He closes his eyes for a moment and then reopens them with a very clear focus. “I’m thinking about it now,” he says.

“That’s good,” Dazai praises, “create a clear mental image and concentrate on it very hard, then the spirits will grant me the power to see it.”

Dazai moves a little closer, drawn in by an invisible magnet. He dips his head and looks at Chuuya with unwavering eye contact; almost as if Chuuya’s thoughts might spill through his eyes like fresh tears and it’s just a matter of being attentive enough to catch them as they fall.

But thoughts are like the deep waters, and Dazai only ever has access to the surface ripples of Chuuya’s mind. It’s nothing but a silly game, a charade to lure in Mishima, and it relies entirely on Chuuya playing along.

Still, fleeting images start appearing in Dazai’s mind, and for a second he questions whether they’re his own or Chuuya’s.

Tangled up limbs, bandages and naked skin, blue eyes, brown eyes, whispers and sighs. The imagery is so clear, so visceral. Dazai can practically feel the hands in his hair, sense the light tug, taste the desperation.

And well, Chuuya did promise to confirm all of Dazai’s nonsense-talk, so why not just go with it?

“Oh! Chuuya!” he says affectedly, clutching a hand to his chest. “This is kinda inappropriate.”

Chuuya appears taken aback, lips forming into a bewildered little pout. “W-what?”

“You are having dirty thoughts, aren’t you? I can see them!”

Chuuya turns red, bad acting finally is replaced by a genuine response. Dazai marvels at the reaction.

“Who's that handsome young man, you’re having fun with in your fantasy, huh?” he teases, “oh wait, the spirits are telling me... it's... someone you started working with recently."

"Um, " Chuuya mumbles intelligently.

“That’s your secret, isn’t it?” Dazai prods, “you have a thing for your new work partner.”

Chuuya takes a deep breath and slowly lets it out. “Yes, I do,” he says, cheeks and ears almost as red as his hair.

“That’s adorable!” Dazai says, clapping his hands together. “Thank you very much for letting me use my special mind-reading powers on you. It’s been a pleasure, Chuuya.”

“Yeah, that’s... You’re welcome, I guess,” Chuuya murmurs, composure ruffled.

“But you know what, the spirits are telling me?” Dazai adds, “they say that they want you to stay - you have a very bright presence, and they want you around while we explore the misdeeds Mishima-kun has done. They’re quite angry with him, and it would be very helpful if you could stick around to calm them down a bit.”

Dazai turns to Mishima, “that’s okay, right?” he pitches his voice to make it extra silvery, something that glows in the sun, a blinding glare.

Mishima squints, eyes slightly unfocused. “That’s fine,” he says.

Dazai reaches out and squeezes Mishima's arm once again - as affectionate as he can.

“Let’s find a bench. You probably want to sit down for this.”

“Why? Are we going to do some kind of exorcism or what? Will it hurt?”

“Shh.” Dazai guides Mishima to the nearest bench with a firm hand on his back, Chuuya and the little white dog following on their heels.

“Don’t worry about a thing. I’ve got you,” Dazai says by way of explanation, “now take a seat and listen carefully to me.”

Mishima sits obediently, hands folded in his lap, face open and waiting for instructions. The dog jumps up onto the bench and curls into a little ball beside its owner, seemingly intent on spending the time wisely by taking a nap.

Dazai straightens up and tilts his chin to look down upon Mishima. “Yokai are created in our imagination,” he explains, “once they’ve taken form in the minds of enough people, they're

externalised and become real spirits that are free to roam the earth just like you and I. For me to communicate with the yokais that have attached to you, I need to access your mind. And to do that, I need to do some mental imagery exercises with you."

Mishima nods in understanding and Dazai starts the induction.

"Close your eyes, please."

Mishima closes his eyes immediately, very sensitive to suggestion, very compliant.

Exactly as Dazai had predicted.

"Take some deep breaths and let tightness leave your body on each exhale. You don't have to worry about anything at all. I've got complete control of the situation. All you need to do is focus on my voice."

Mishima does as told, inhaling and exhaling loudly through his nose, tension visibly leaving his body as his features relax and he slumps forward slightly.

"Good," Dazai says in a low tone, "you're doing so well already."

Dazai is acutely aware of Chuuya's presence just beside him and registers it clearly when his breathing goes a little ragged.

It's an interesting reaction, which can be interpreted in a myriad of ways - and Dazai absolutely will - but there's, unfortunately, the task at hand, which he needs to focus on first.

"Now, I'm going to count down from ten," Dazai says, making sure to pitch down his voice and constrict his vocal cords slightly, so a little rasp accompanies his words as they spill from his mouth. "And on each count, you'll feel your body getting heavier, and your mind will sink into a deeper state of relaxation."

There's a subtle drop of Mishima's head, which indicates that he's already starting to feel heavier even before the countdown has started.

"You're doing *very* well," Dazai echoes for the second time and then proceeds to count down: "One, feel your feet become heavy. It's as though they're rooted to the earth. Two, heavier and more relaxed…" Dazai pauses, waiting for the suggestion to seep into Mishima's mind and fester.

"Three, your legs are heavy. Don't fight it, just allow yourself to become more, and more relaxed. Four, notice now that your legs are so heavy that you couldn't move them even if you wanted to."

Mishima's breathing is starting to become slower and his head drops so that it's hanging between his shoulders.

Everything is going to plan, and Dazai continues, enthusiastically. "Five, six. Heavier and more relaxed, let it spread through your upper body and into your arms." He waits a few

moments for the words to sink in, and then continues, “seven, eight. Heavy and relaxed, no more thoughts, just my voice.”

Mishima’s posture collapses progressively - he has folded in on himself like a flower preparing for the cold night.

“Nine. notice how heavy your eyelids are. Even if you try to blink your eyes open, you won’t be able to. It feels like they’re glued together… And ten,” Dazai finishes, “let this deep state of relaxation wash over you. Let my voice become your only guide. Nothing else matters.” He bends at the waist to lean a little closer to Mishima, whispering in soft tones into the space between them, “notice how easy it is. You have no worries. I will take care of everything. All you have to do is listen and answer. Do you understand.”

Mishima sits as still, *as unresponsive,* as a statue, and Chuuya seems to be struggling to suppress a laugh, covering it with his sleeve (but not at all hiding how unimpressed he is with the effects of hypnosis so far).

That’s fine. He hasn’t seen anything yet.

“Mishima-kun, please nod if you understand,” Dazai says sweetly, “are you going to listen to me and answer all my questions?”

Mishima nods, slow and laboured. His eyes are still closed, but the motion is there, and it clearly signifies his willingness to cooperate.

“That’s good. Let’s get started then.” Dazai cracks his knuckles. “Who are you working for?”

“Fumiko Hayashi”

I see. You’re part of the Fumiko-gumi. You have an illusion ability, don’t you?”

“Yes, I- it’s… my ability is...” Mishima starts, slow and chopped up, clearly struggling to remember how to put words together.

“It’s?” Dazai prompts.

“Confessions Of A Mask.”

“Ah, what a cute name. It allows you to alter the appearance of the things you touch, right?”

“Yes.”

”And you used it to help you steal The Great Wave from the Mori Art Museum." Dazai says, a statement rather than a question. "What is your organisation planning to do with it?”

“We want… they’re going to… sell it.”

“Yes, I guessed that much. When and where.”

“Auction. Saturday at… the gallery.”

Dazai frowns. He highly doubts that stolen art will be auctioned at a gallery, but it could be a codeword or a yakuza-owned gallery that's hidden from the public. "An actual gallery?"

"Yes, The Sinking Cloud."

It's the latter option, then. "Who organises these events?" he asks, "do you have contact with the event planners?"

"I-I… help."

"You help them organize it? You're part of the auctions team?"

"Yes."

"That's good. I'm going to give you a task, and it's very important you follow through on this."

"I need you to make sure that invitations for this event are extended to Shuji Tsushima and his fiance Alexandre. They're staying at The Stray Dogs Park Hotel in the penthouse suite. Understood?"

"Yes."

Dazai smiles approvingly. "Now, here's what will happen. In a few moments, I will snap my fingers, and you will wake up. You'll feel good; light and refreshed. You won't remember any of the details of what we've talked about, but you'll still be aware of the importance of ensuring that invitations are sent to Shuji Tsushima and his plus-one, okay?"

"Yes."

"Good, you've done well," Dazai says and raises a hand to snap his fingers.

Mishima blinks his eyes open, looking like someone who has just fallen from the moon, expression wild and aggressively confused, eyes slightly unfocused and mouth set in a line that's upset in that distinctly overwhelmed way.

"Wha-?"

"How are you feeling, Mishima-kun?" Dazai interrupts, "that was quite an experience, huh?"

"I… what happened. I don't remember. Did you..." Mishima trails off fidgeting with the edge of his sleeve.

"Yes, yes." Dazai replies, "I had a chat with the spirits who follow you around. They're still a little upset that you stole something, but they'll get over it, and they'll leave you alone."

"Oh. That's… good."

"You feel much better now, don't you?"

Mishima looks down at his feet as if to check that they're still there, rooted to the ground and very real. "Yeah," he says, looking back up at Dazai, "I feel great actually. Very light, like… a weight has been lifted from my shoulders."

"Ah, yes," Dazai says, beaming like a sun, "that's what a spiritual detox does to you. None of those angry yokais infecting your system anymore."

"That's… wow. Thank you so much."

Dazai preens, hiding his chin behind a lifted shoulder. "Oh don't mention it, I'm gifted - would be a shame if I didn't bless others with my amazing powers."

"Can I… have your number?"

Dazai hears Chuuya take in a sharp breath, and delights in that very unsubtle reaction.

"Oh, I don't give my number to just anyone."

Mishima deflates. "But I might need a spiritual detox again at some point. My job is… it requires that I occasionally do things that might upset some spirits."

"Well, don't worry. Psychic mediums are *very* intuitive. I - or one of my colleagues - will surely find you if you need it. That's how this works. If you put the right kind of energy into the universe, you'll attract the things you need. Like today - I found you when you needed me the most, didn't I?"

"Yes, but-"

"Trust the flow of life. Your goal is to become an enlightened jellyfish: go with the stream, and it will take you where you need to be. No need to worry. Anytime you need a spiritual medium, one will cross your path."

Mishima lowers his head, a sign of respect and understanding. "You're right, Kato-senpai. Thank you for sharing your wisdom."

"You're so welcome. It was a pleasure meeting you, my friend," Dazai says and bows respectfully.

Chuuya too bows although it's more of a nod of his head than it's an actual bow. "It was nice meeting you but we actually have this important thing that we need to do, so we need to go, right?" he says, kind of snippy, looking at Dazai with sharp eyes.

Mishima's eyebrows lift, confusion written all over his face. "Oh. You two know each other?"

"Um. No? NO! No-no," Chuuya stutters, lifting his hands like he's trying to shield himself or physically push the idea away, "it's just… um, I'd like a spiritual detox too, and I think that… we should go back to my place and do it cause I, um, don't feel comfortable doing it in a public place, y'know?"

Dazai clears his throat to squish down the laughter that threatens to spill out. “Of course, Chuuya. You are very popular with the spirits, and there aren’t any malicious ones following you around, so it’s not like you *need* a detox - but if you *want* one, then I’m here for you.”

“Good, cause I do want. Very much. My place. We’re leaving.”

He spins promptly on his heels and waltzes off.

Dazai finally allows the laughter to bloom, looking after Chuuya's retreating form with bemusement. “What a feisty one, huh?” he says, the question directed more at the dog that still lies beside its owner than Mishima himself because only a puppy can truly be able to comprehend the hyperactive energy that surrounds Chuuya.

Mishima hums non-committedly and the dog wags its tail.

“It was nice to meet you too,” Dazai says to the dog, “I’m not the biggest fan of dogs, but you’re a good one.”

And then he whirls around and storms after Chuuya.

“I’ll see you around, Mishima-kun,” he calls over his shoulder although he sincerely hopes that he won’t. It’s going to throw a wrench into the wheel of the operation if Mishima recognises them when they show up at the auction, but that problem is for later.

Now, Dazai will focus on giving Chuuya the “spiritual detox” that he so eagerly requested.

Chuuya truly is very open in his communication. It’s always so obvious with him; so easy to understand what’s going on, what his needs are and what he’s asking for.

Dazai considers how tiring it must be to be so honest. He can’t imagine, but he finds it utterly fascinating in the way that makes him want to behold Chuuya’s honesty like it’s a piece of art. To study it and maybe even try to copy it (if he feels brave enough).

Instead of walking on the path like a normal person, Chuuya has opted for the most direct route to the park gates, which is over the grass. there’s a cluster of closely spaced cherry trees on the field, and Chuuya is slipping in between them like they're some kind of maze.

Dazai catches up to Chuuya in quick strides and reaches out to take Chuuya’s hat (for no reason, in particular, the hat is just there begging to be lifted off).

He’s about to place the dumb hat on his own head when Chuuya snatches it back in a quick movement.

“Stop being so childish,” he snaps, but the way his eyes glimmer doesn’t exactly discourage playfulness.

“Genius is no more or less than childhood recaptured at will,” Dazai comments matter of factly, tipping his head back, nose pointing towards the sky.

“Hah.” Chuuya stops abruptly, and Dazai too halts his movements to check what’s going on.

Chuuya is glancing around checking their surroundings, with laser-like focus.

What's going on? Are they being followed? Dazai hasn't noticed anything that would suggest such a thing, and he *always notices everything*.

"What's up?" he asks, moving a step closer to Chuuya.

And then it dawns on him. He can practically smell the tension radiating off Chuuya's body; it mixes with his familiar scent of citrus and tobacco, and it has *nothing* to do with nervousness surrounding the theme of being followed - Chuuya is just checking that they're alone, cause Chuuya-

"Hmph." Dazai lets out a puff of air as he's pushed, rather unnecessarily forcefully, up against a tree.

Chuuya is so close that Dazai can see the galaxies drifting around in those blue eyes.

So close, he can see little freckles on Chuuya cheeks.

So close, he can taste the tension.

So very close.

And then, Chuuya leans impossibly closer, breath ghosting over Dazai's lips, eyes flickering like little blue stars.

"That," he whispers, "was really hot."

"Um?" Dazai is, uncharacteristically lost for words. He doesn't even know what Chuuya is referring to. "What was?"

Chuuya's hands are firm against his shoulders, holding on as though to ground him, and it's very convenient, cause Dazai feels a little light-headed. Like his head is full of helium and he might float into to the sky never to be seen again if it wasn't for Chuuya's firm grip.

Chuuya smiles, small but monumental. "The way you hypnotised him." He shakes his head, smile still plastered to his stupidly pretty face. "You just… you're just so fucking brainy. It's-ugh."

Dazai's could point out, that while the illusion that he's a prodigy with near-omnipotent powers is very convenient for him, it's far from the truth, and the list of things he's utterly hopeless at could fill a whole encyclopedia. But that kind of information seems scary to admit, and he doesn't feel like cooking up some fake modest answer either, so he settles for a half-shrug.

His shoulder barely lifts under Chuuya's warm hand, but it's enough to set something into motion; enough to count as a response.

Chuuya's smile stretches into a bright mischievous grin, "I like it when you go all quiet," he says into the short distance between them.

Dazai wants that distance gone and eradicated.

And then they're kissing: sharing the same space, the same breath, the same rhythm; a harmonious, addictive closeness.

Dazai doesn't remember the few seconds between distance and closeness, but it doesn't matter.

The kiss crackles and drags, turning the texture of the universe into something wonderful. Instead of clinging to his last threads of composure, he clings to Chuuya, and it's so nice to have someone to cling to. Someone to be consumed by.

It's so… beautiful.

But of course, there's no beauty without melancholy and sadness is a sea inside of Dazai that rises and falls with the phases of his unpredictable erratic moods.

It's... overwhelming.

And it's a shame that it's so hard to just be in the moment when the moment is so sweet.

"What's wrong?" Chuuya asks, pulling away slightly, leaning his head back to put more distance between them as he searches Dazai's face.

It's unpleasant to be the object of that kind of concern.

"It's nothing," Dazai stresses, lunching forward again to capture Chuuya's lips. But he's stopped by a hand on his chest, which gently pushes him away.

"It's not nothing," Chuuya counters. "I totally lost you there for a second. Were you. Uh? Overwhelmed?"

"*No*."

Chuuya looks sceptical like he knows something that Dazai doesn't.

"Okay," he says after a little pause, vague and inconclusive. He then follows it up with, "let's go get lunch, you haven't eaten anything yet," like that's a natural sequitur.

Dazai lets his features slide into something very put-upon. "Still not hungry," he whines, hoping to communicate just how okay he is and how much he wants to pick up where they left before Chuuya had to go all concerned about nothing.

Chuuya gives an exasperated look. "I don't think you know what hunger feels like. There's no way you aren't hungry if you've been up all night and you're running on just coffee."

"But I wanted to give you a spiritual detox," Dazai whines.

Chuuya wrinkles his nose. "Ew, don't call it that."

Dazai snickers at Chuuya's sour face. “Can we please do some more spiritual work when we’re back at the hotel? I think we both need to rebalance our auras and I know just how to do it.”

“Deal. You buy me lunch, and I'll give you a spiritual awakening.”

“But I'm the one with psychic powers,” Dazai reminds.

There’s a light breeze, which rustles the branches of the cherry trees, and a few flowers fall off, drizzling down like rain. One lands in Dazai’s hair, touching down lightly, only slightly heavier than air.

Chuuya’s eyes move up to look at the flower, and there’s a smile toying at his lips.

“You haven’t seen my powers yet, cherry-flower boy.”

He then let’s go of Dazai, hands slowly sliding from his shoulders.

“Come on. Let’s go,” he says as he straightens his jacket and rebalances the hat on top of his head.

Dazai too feels the need to readjust a few pieces of clothing before taking off towards the park gates.

“Hey,” Chuuya says, breaking the silence, “who’s that Sushi guy you were talking about?”

“Shuji Tsushima,” Dazai corrects. “He’s just a rich brat, with a passion for art collection. He lives of old money and is marrying into more money. His fiance Alexandre Louis d'Albert de Luynes is a French aristocrat. They’re quite a cute couple actually.”

“You never mentioned them before… are they working on this case with us or what is going on? Why did you ask that Mishima-thief to invite them?”

Dazai can sense that Chuuya is seeking eye contact, and knows that those eyes are probably full of questions, but Dazai is busy looking at grass straws as they bend around his feet every time he takes a step.

“I’ve seen those French poetry books in your room,” he says, cause that seems like a natural hint to give.

“And?”

“And, you boast a pretty good command of French, right?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Because I’m playing the part of Shuji Tsushima. He’s one of my fake personas I’ve created specifically for the work I do in the art world. And you’ll be posing as my fiance, Alexandre.”

There’s a long delicate pause, and then.

“Oh.”

And then more silence, only interrupted by the crunching of grass under their shoes.

“Will I be speaking french the whole time then?” is what Chuuya asks when he finally speaks again.

“No-no. I’ve created a much more convenient backstory for you. Alexandre speaks Japanese, just fine. He’s half Japanese and went to school here in Japan, which is also where he met Shuji. They only met recently and fell head over heels in love with each other. They’re engaged and plan on moving to one of Alexandre’s family’s many castles just outside of Paris soon.”

“Okay, that’s… wow. You set this whole thing up?”

Dazai nods like it’s not a big deal. It isn’t. He does this kind of thing all the time.

Chuuya shakes his head, seemingly unable to believe what’s happening.

“Est-ce que tu te fous de moi?”

Dazai laughs. "Je ne vous mentirai jamais, Chuuya."

Chapter End Notes

- Thank you so much for reading all the way to the end <333 I've been obsessing over this chapter. I wanted it to be accurate and detailed but not boring and I really really hope it worked out okay, but I’m so insecure about this so please if you like this leave a comment and let me know that you weren’t bored to death reading this.

- As for hypnosis. People react differently when under hypnosis. Some people may act almost as they do normally, but some people get kinda spaced out- I’ve hypnotised a lot of my friends and most of them seemed super out of it and they were barely able to answer my questions because they were so dazed so I decided to give Mishima the same kind of reaction.

- Genius is no more or less than childhood recaptured at will - a line borrowed from our dear friend Edgar Allan Poe :)

- The french part: Chuuya = Are you kidding me?, Dazai = I’d never lie to you, Chuuya.

And again, thank you so much for reading, I really appreciate it 💖💖💖💖

7. Spiritual awakenings

Chapter Summary

How shall I hold back my soul from touching yours? - Rainer Maria Rilke.

Finally the explicit content we're all here for.

Chapter Notes

Hi friends!

Sorry, this chapter took me FOREVER to finish. I promised myself I would write a short one and then I just.... wrote the longest chapter yet? Also, I had exams this month so I wasn't able to dedicate as much time to this as I wanted to.

Anyway. Enough about me and my boring life. Hope you enjoy this chapter. Thank you SO much for reading. It means everything to me 💖💓💝💕

CW: Implied self-harm and some past sexual encounters that weren't super optimal in terms of respecting boundaries - It's only referenced. No details or graphic descriptions.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dazai isn't one for fancy, expensive restaurants. They tend to have long waiting times and incomprehensible etiquette rules. However, they also tend to have food that's actually worth eating, and Chuuya seems to be very insistent on the idea of getting food.

So Dazai picks one of those fancy, expensive restaurants, Kogane no Kani.

Kogane no Kani has a lot of things going for it. For starters, Dazai has visited it before, which makes it somewhat familiar, and familiar is good. He also knows it serves a delightful crab dish, and crab is the only food Dazai feels strongly about (other foods simply exist passively on the arbitrary like/dislike scale). Another good thing about the restaurant is that it has a few private rooms, which can be booked upon request *or* Dazai can bat his lashes just right, and then the host will gladly set up a private table for him. On top of that, the location is splendid, offering a view over the Meguro River and the cherry trees that are blooming on both sides of the river like a blazing pastel pink fire.

They pass through the restaurant's revolving doors, Dazai first and Chuuya trailing closely behind him.

Chuuya sticks out like a sore thumb with his casual clothes in the upscale environment, but he carries himself with a sense of completely unashamed nobility nonetheless.

There's a deep blue carpet on the floor in the reception area. It clashes strangely with the white marble tiles it's placed upon, creating the visual illusion of a deep drop. Stepping onto it feels like walking off the precipice of a cliff, it feels like falling, It feels like vertigo.

Dazai looks up, ignoring the dizziness.

A host dressed in a crisp black suit is standing behind a podium made of solid oak. He makes painful eye contact, and then his eyes travel down Dazai's form.

Interest? Probably.

Dazai stares back, taking in the host's appearance: small built, delicate hands, bitten down nails, nervous ticks, slightly hunched posture.

"Hello, darling," he says, smiling pleasantly.

"Good afternoon, sir. Table for two?" The host replies, still looking at Dazai, not really letting his eyes wander towards Chuuya much.

"Yes, I was hoping you could show me and my colleague to one of the private rooms. We have some *confidential matters* to discuss," Dazai says in his most sugary tone of voice, head tilted to the side and coy smile on his lips.

"Those are usually reserved for special patrons and have to be booked ahead of time," the host answers. A measured response, but still - not very convincing.

Dazai hums. "What's your name?"

"... Haruto."

"Haruto," Dazai repeats slowly, tasting each syllable, "it's a lovely name. Suits you."

"Thanks."

Dazai moves closer, inch by inch, until he can lean his elbows on the podium. "Haruto-kun, when was the last time someone told you that you have the most beautiful eyes."

"Uh?"

"Because you do."

"I... do?"

"M-hmm. I'd love to see more of those eyes," Dazai purrs, lowering his chin to peek through the see-through curtain of his hair. It's a look he has practised and perfected - it tends to get the job done. "Maybe, when I've finished my meeting, you and I could... *y'know*?"

Haruto scratches the back of his neck. There's a warm flush to his face, and his fingers seem to be trembling just a little.

What a nervous human being.

Dazai tilts his head. "You're not going to say no to me, are you, Haruto-kun?"

"I.. no."

"That's good. So you'll seat us in one of the private rooms?"

Haruto swallows, slow and hesitant. "I-I… um," he stumbles over the words.

Dazai narrows his gaze. "Please," he says but makes sure to make it sound like an order more than a request.

"Yes," Haruto finally affirms and starts fumbling around for two menus cards.

Dazai smiles in answer, a smile embellished with all the empty promises of a fake prophet. He then shoots a look over his shoulder to check on Chuuya: his fists are tight, and his usual delicate features have turned into an angry scowl. Something about that anger looks so intense - like it could make him do horrible things without a second thought. Set poetry books on fire, trample on flowers, throw plates on the floor.

Dazai smiles at Chuuya, soaks in the anger and lets it destroy the hollowness of the smile he just offered to Haruto. The smile that's left on his lips is achingly honest.

"Okay," Haruto says, "Follow me, please."

Chuuya promptly moves ahead, shoulder bumping into Dazai as he passes.

They're led through the restaurant's main dining room, and Dazai's senses wander around to take stock. His eyes take photographs that are stored away in his memory for time eternal, his ears record sounds that are filed as speech, music or noise, and his nose picks up the scents and combines them into rich and complex perfumes that he carries around with him all day. It's not a choice. It's something that just happens - something he has learned to live with only by the act of brutish routine acceptance. The unfiltered mess of images, noises and scents is a familiar kind of overwhelm.

They pass through a narrow corridor that is lined with thin paper wall-lamps and bamboo doors on either side. The noise of the main room fades with every step they take, a comfortable silence slowly creeping into the scenery.

At the very end of the hallway, Haruto pulls a screen door open and shows them into the private dining room. It's a wonderfully withdrawn and quiet place where they can safely slump into they're cushioned seats and relax in the hushed sunlight that streams in through the curtained windows.

The host places the menus on the already set table and draws back the thin silk curtains behind which a wonderful view of the river-reflected sunlight dancing around the cherry

blossoms greets them.

Haruto bows deeply and shuffles out of the room. As soon as screen door slides shut behind him, Chuuya turns to glare at Dazai.

“What the *fuck* was that?”

“What?”

Chuuya crosses his arms over his chest and raises his chin. “You know what? Do you have to flirt with everything that moves?”

“You should be thanking me. I got us into a nice private room.”

“I should be slapping you,” Chuuya says exasperatedly as he steps back and runs a hand through his hair, “I won’t, though. I’m too fucking nice to you - although you don't deserve it at all.”

Dazai frowns. “Are you mad at me?”

“Obviously.”

“But why? Are you jealous?”

“Shut up.” Chuuya sneers, sounding for all the world like a hissing snake.

“You are!" Dazai provokes, "why? I’m not interested in him at all. I was just-”

“Manipulating him. Yes. I don’t like when you do that. Please stop.”

“But why? You didn't mind when I hypnotised Mishima. Why is this worse?”

Chuuya sighs, long-suffering and unnecessarily loud. “It just is.”

“But I didn’t do anything wrong," Dazai insists, moulding his face into a portrait of irresistible adorableness, "we need privacy to discuss our plan from here on out, and it’s not like Haruto won’t get over it when I stand him up.”

Chuuya shakes his head. “I don’t know if I can explain this in a way that will make sense to you, but isn't it enough that I don’t like it?”

Dazai mulls it over for a second and then yields. “Okay, I’ll stop it - just because you don’t like it.”

“Thanks.”

Dazai folds his arms over his chest and adds a mocking edge to his smile. “Oh, don’t mention it,” he chirps, melodically, “I'm just being nice to you although you don’t deserve it at all.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes. ”Fucking brat,” he mutters under his breath, then turns and walks over to the table.

He sinks into a chair and starts looking over the menu, eyes moving in quick saccades.

Dazai observes Chuuya's face carefully. There aren't any remnants of anger left, which is fascinating; Chuuya is somehow capable of letting emotions go as quickly as they arrive.

Dazai deftly slides into his chair. It's soft but somehow uncomfortable. He can't quite figure out how to sit in it, so he shuffles around awkwardly, crossing and uncrossing his legs until he decides to just take off his shoes and get into a crossed-legged position.

"I know I said I would treat you to lunch, but did you have to go and pick the most expensive place in all of Tokyo?" Chuuya asks, making a wry face at the menu, seemingly horrified by the prices.

"I like this place. There's crab on the menu and… yeah. That's why I like it."

"Why don-"

"You don't have to pay for this, Chuuya."

"But I want to. You're paying for the hotel, so it's only fair that I buy you lunch."

Dazai rolls his eyes to the ceiling. "Who cares about fair?"

"I do."

Dazai blinks. "You know what?" he says, a brilliant idea taking form in his mind, "I'm sure I could talk us out of having to pay the bill."

"Didn't we just talk about this? Please don't try." Chuuya sounds tired, but his eyes look vivid as they catch the pale sunlight that pours in through the windows.

Dazai counts the shades of blue in Chuuya's eyes but quickly gives up. Counting to infinity is a waste of time. "You don't think I could do it," he asks instead.

Chuuya huffs. "Oh, I know you could, but just drop it. I'm paying."

Dazai sulks but does let it go.

When a waitress arrives to take their orders, he doesn't even say a word, just points to the menu to show which dish he wants - Crab Tempura. It's listed as an appetizer, but it's also the only crab dish on the menu, which means that it's going to have to be enough.

Chuuya orders Ramen and a glass of wine. Some fancy name that Dazai has never heard before. He stores the information away for later - it's good to be aware of Chuuya's taste in wine.

The waitress refocuses on Dazai. "The same drink order for you, sir?"

Dazai purses his lips. He isn't the biggest fan of wine, but he doesn't trust himself to open his mouth without trying to manipulate the waitress into giving them a free meal - and he

promised Chuuya he wouldn’t.

Saying '*just water, please'* really shouldn’t be so hard.

It shouldn't, but there’s a lump in his throat, and it grows every time he tries to swallow it down.

He smiles wider to make up for the delay in his answer and looks helplessly between Chuuya and the waitress.

“Yeah, I’ll have the same,” is what Dazai ends up saying.

“Noted,” The waitress replies perfunctorily. It’s all very professional. Very fake. Dazai feels a sense of uneasy kinship with her.

He watches as she turns and leaves the room. The door closes behind her, and it becomes easier to breathe again. With his lungs properly ventilated, he turns his head to refocus on his dining partner.

Chuuya has this look plastered on his face; curiosity and amusement. It’s that particular Chuuya-flavoured delight.

Dazai lets a puff of air out through his nose. “What?” he asks, indignant even before he knows what has Chuuya looking so amused (it’s not like he can’t guess at what it is quite easily).

“Since when do you like wine?” Chuuya questions, voice light and laughter simmering just below the surface.

“Since always,” Dazai answers easily. The key to a great lie is to make it sound as improbable as possible.

Chuuya snorts quietly. A cute little sound that’s awfully hard to hate.

“If you say so,” he says, and that's a very vague and circumstantial thing to say, but it somehow leaves no room for argument.

Seconds later, the waitress flies into the room like a levitating ghost, feet barely touching the ground as she skitters across the floor.

She pours the wine with the precision of a micro-surgeon, and Dazai finds himself fascinated with the way the blood-red substance spills into the glasses.

The waitress bows and turns to leave but Chuuya calls after her. “Do you have mango juice?”

The waitress spins around, the veneer of professionalism broken by the look on her face, which screams surprise and... vague horror? (Dazai can’t imagine why. Wine is vile, so surely washing it down with mango juice would make for a great improvement.)

“You want juice together with the wine, sir?”

Chuuya seems utterly unfazed by her judgemental tone. “Yeah. A glass of mango juice would be wonderful, thanks. And a bottle of still water too.”

She smiles a flat little smile and bows again. “Right away, sir.”

“Thank you,” Chuuya answers smoothly. He takes a big gulp of the wine - big enough that most wine enthusiasts would probably label it as inappropriately eager.

Dazai too lifts his glass to take a tentative sip. The wine is just as awful as he thought it would be. Bitter, heady, nauseating.

With what he knows to be a disgruntled look on his face, he sets the glass down on the table again. He keeps his eyes focused on Chuuya, who seems terribly amused.

“You don’t like it, do you?”

“I love it~” Dazai chants sweetly, still dedicated to the mission of selling an improbable lie.

Chuuya hums, and the corners of his lips raise into something fond looking. Dazai can’t look away.

Chuuya takes another keen swig of the distasteful wine. “So…”

“So?” Dazai repeats, leaning back in his chair.

“We need to work on a plan. I don’t think we can just walk into a gallery and steal a painting without anyone noticing.”

“But that *is* the plan,” Dazai says, and if he sounds dismissive, that's good - he’s intending to. It’s fun to rile Chuuya up.

It seems to work. Chuuya’s features are slithering into an aggravated glare. “Okay genius. Explain to me, *in detail*, how you intend to pull that off.”

“The plan is to get caught trying to lift the painting off the wall.”

Chuuya narrows his eyes as though he’s trying to make out something that is very hard to see. “Come again,” he says when he, supposedly, doesn’t see the clearer image.

“Okay, here’s the plan,” Dazai says with a playful grin, “I'll pretend to be so drunk that I can’t walk straight. I’ll walk right up to the painting and take it off the wall. Then a security guard is going to catch me, and that security guard is going to be you.”

“Hmm.” Chuuya lifts the wine glass to his lips and takes a long sip. When he lowers the glass again, his lips are stained red.

“I thought I was supposed to be your fiance?” he responds after a thoughtful pause.

“You get to pretend to be a princess for the first part of the night, cinderella. Once we get in, you’ll change into a security guard uniform.”

Chuuya opens his mouth but whatever he's going to say is interrupted by the sound of the screen door sliding open, well-oiled metal and smooth friction.

The food is balanced on a tray along with a bottle of water and a tall, narrow glass of juice.

The waitress carefully places the dishes in front of them, pours both of them a glass of water and then, none too delicately, sets the mango juice, in front of Chuuya.

She whisks away as quickly as she came with a sugary, "enjoy your meal," on her lips. It sounds rehearsed, but not exactly insincere and Dazai doesn't know how to feel about that, but the crab looks as delicious as always, and it's not like *feelings* are going to affect the way it tastes, so he doesn't see why he should even care.

"Okay," Chuuya starts as he pushes the glass of juice towards Dazai, "go on. Explain the plan."

Dazai eyes the juice. There's a pastel blue straw sticking out of it, and it looks very inviting. He glances back at Chuuya - his eyes a different shade of blue - a different kind of inviting.

"You're going to pretend to try and take the painting from me, but I'll cling on to it real tight and say I'll scratch it with my nails or spit on it if you take it."

He leans forward and catches the straw with his lips.

Chuuya follows the action with his eyes. "Sounds like something you would say."

Dazai tilts his head bashfully. "Now, this is where it gets tricky. I'm assuming there's already a security guard in the room and at this point, they'll probably jump in to help you. If they ask who you are or what you're doing in the room they're assigned to, just say you're following me because I look suspiciously unsteady on my feet and that I just tried to steal a diamond necklace right off a woman's neck - clearly indicating kleptomaniac tendencies."

Chuuya snorts, and his eyes twinkle with mirth. Dazai wants to collect those little sparkes and put them in a jar.

"Now," Dazai continues, "the other security guard is probably going to try to get me to let go of the painting too. Possibly even point a gun to my head or something kinky like that."

Chuuya makes a face but doesn't comment otherwise.

"This," Dazai lifts a finger to emphasise the importance of the point he's about to deliver, "is the point where you suggest you take me to the security room and get me to calm down. Once we're in the security room, you'll check my pockets for other stolen items, but you'll just find the usual stuff… phone, wallet and - importantly - a plastic bag. Take all the items and put them aside."

"Okay?"

"I'll be my most annoying self, but I'll let go of the painting, and while I keep the other guard distracted and busy by being intolerable, you'll suggest that you put the painting back on the

wall in the gallery room."

"Oh, I see where this is going."

Dazai grins. "Good. You'll carefully slip the painting into the bag and walk off. Take the back entrance out and if anyone asks or look suspiciously at you just say your shift is over and you're going home."

"How are you gonna get out though?"

"The security guard will let me go. They won't be interested in keeping me. What are they going to do? Contact the police? This is an illegal organisation - they don't want the police around."

"Makes sense," Chuuya says as he nods his head slowly and then thoughtfully adds, "they won't hurt you?"

Dazai shakes his head. "This *is* the mafia, but all the guests at the auction are highly influential people, and they know that they'll get in big trouble if they try anything too violent. They're probably just going to call me a taxi and follow me to the door."

"That seems too easy."

"Easy is good," Dazai contests.

Chuuya opens his mouth but then seems to think better of it. "Yeah," he agrees, nodding his head gently, red hair swaying around his cheeks, "sometimes easy is good."

They finish their meals. Chuuya tries to sneak a few pieces of chicken onto Dazai's plate, and when Dazai shoots him a dirty look, he huffs. "You haven't had breakfast, and that little appetizer isn't enough!"

"I'm not that hungry."

"Sometimes you should eat even though you don't feel hungry."

Dazai considers it. It doesn't sound right but if Chuuya says it he is willing to entertain the idea.

He carefully scoops up the chicken with his chopsticks, puts it in his mouth and chews on it slowly. The texture is awful, but the taste is okay so Dazai tunes out the noise and focuses on the sensation provided by his taste buds.

Chuuya smiles, and it feels a lot like being rewarded.

『O』

As they step out of the restaurant, a fresh spring breeze gently flutters around them, and Dazai starts shivering. Dumb, dysfunctional circulatory system - he so easily gets cold.

He's just about to stick his hands in his pockets when Chuuya reaches for his hand, takes it and just... holds it… *tenderly*, like it's a baby dove or some other equally feathery-soft thing. Dazai doesn't appreciate it at all. It's too gentle and gentle means wrong. He's made of solid rock, and he deserves to be treated that way.

He squeezes Chuuya's hand, and Chuuya immediately retracts it. Instead, an arm is slung over Dazai's shoulder, firm and secure.

And just like that, they walk down the street with the afternoon sun beaming down on them in full action, (still, it doesn't shine through the dim haze in Dazai's mind).

The Stray Dogs Park hotel is almost painfully fancy. Chuuya, *strong Chuuya*, looks almost like he's about to crumble under the lavish ostentatiousness. His eyes dart around with little coordination, taking in the crystal chandelier, the tall vases filled to the brim with blooming orchids, the clash of the plush western-style chairs scattered around fragile-looking glass tables, the objectively distasteful marble statues of cats that adorn the spacious foyer.

"For a hotel that has 'dogs' in its name there are a lot of cats around here," Chuuya says after a long moment.

Dazai shrugs as they walk around a bonsai garden display, "I personally think it's wonderful. I enjoy the absurdity of it."

"Figures you'd say something like that," Chuuya comments. There's a private little smile tugging on his lips, the crystal light reflecting his eyes and his hair shining in hundreds of shades of copper.

And for someone like Dazai who lives in a dim mist of detachment - a safe place where nothing can touch him, but where he also can't touch anything - Chuuya's presence seems so unfamiliarly tactile. So unfamiliarly real.

And on a very primal level, Dazai wants to *touch.*

He reaches out a hand, and Chuuya doesn't even seem surprised when that hand seizes a stray curl.

Dazai doesn't know where he is going with that action; his hand just executed without clearing it with his brain first.

"Uh," he says dumbly, pulling a bit on the curl before he catches his bearings and brushes the hair behind Chuuya's ear. "It was in the way."

"Was it?"

"Yeah. Got in your eyes." Dazai answers, with as much stoicism as he can muster. He's merely reciting facts.

Chuuya laughs, lighthearted and turbulent. It echoes in the large foyer, and a couple of people turn their heads to send some dirty looks.

“Come on,” Chuuya says, pushing Dazai not too gently towards the elevator.

Dazai presses the button for the top floor and watches with detachment as the doors close.

“You don’t like these, do you?” Chuuya asks all of a sudden, and Dazai almost jumps at the unexpected sound.

“What?” he asks, brain not willing to accept the implications of Chuuya’s question.

“Small spaces?” Chuuya clarifies.

“I don’t mind,” Dazai says. Of all the things Dazai could be fearful of, the physical dimension of space is the least threatening. So why would he dislike it?

“Just don’t like the bluish-white lights in here. It’s terrifying. This seems like a place people get murdered,” Dazai says, and he is very content with that explanation. Murder seems like a very legitimate thing to be afraid of.

Chuuya looks at him. There’s something very imploring about it. He crosses his arms, looking an awful lot like someone who’s going to deliver some kind of grand point - but then he doesn’t say anything. Just exhales slowly through his mouth and shakes his head almost imperceptibly.

The elevator comes to a stop with a loud --*diiing*--

The doors open and Dazai steps out first, leading the way to the suite.

He swipes the keycard, and they enter their temporary home.

It’s as unnecessarily lavish as the rest of the hotel and as impersonal as a glass of tap water, but Dazai doesn’t mind for the reason that he gets to share it with someone - he likes it more than he’ll ever like his own place.

Chuuya takes off his boots and carefully places them on the shoe rack, before walking into the suite. Dazai toes off his shoes too but doesn’t bother putting them aside. He simply leaves them in the middle of the entrance area as some sort of archaeological mark of his presence.

He trails behind Chuuya who’s checking out the suit with the overjoyed attentiveness of a kitten, walking from room to room as assessing eyes scan the surroundings like a radar.

“Is that real gold?” Chuuya asks when they reach the living room. He’s pointing to the massive grand piano that’s taking up space on the left side of the room. Sure enough, its legs shimmer a golden hue in the late afternoon light that pours in through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Dazai shrugs. “Who cares. What matters is if it *sounds* good.”

“Hmm. But how funny would it be if this fancy-ass gold piano was totally off-tune.”

Dazai thinks about that for a second, but he doesn't reach any other conclusion than the obvious one. “Not funny at all,” he replies matter-of-factly.

“Right, of course not. You have sensitive ears, don’t you? I’m sure dissonant sounds are very offensive to you.” Chuuya looks Dazai up and down. Appraising. Knowing.

Dazai doesn’t know what to say, and that’s a rare experience for him. “Will you play for me?” is what he ends up saying - an unplanned question.

He feels heat rising to his cheeks - an unplanned response.

Things are falling totally and completely apart at an alarming rate, but Chuuya is smiling, so maybe it’s okay.

“How do you even know I can play the piano?” Chuuya asks.

“You have pianist's hands.”

Chuuya looks down at his hands, supposedly checking if they really do possess this 'pianist quality'.

Dazai considers Chuuya’s hands too. They’re nice hands.

“There’s an old piano in one of the Agency's meeting rooms. It’s still being used, when I visited you guys the time before last, I pressed its keys to check. It’s also rare that the dust cover is on, which suggests it’s being played regularly.”

Chuuya’s eyes gleam with something nearly imperceptible. “It’s not just there for me. Naomi-chan plays too.”

“But you do play.”

“Yeah… maybe I’ll play a sonata for you later. If I’m in the mood.”

Chuuya’s attention wavers. It seems to have been caught by something behind Dazai.

Dazai turns to follow Chuuya’s gaze. It’s on the high-quality gift box on the coffee table. It’s giftwrapped in pastel blue cellophane and finished with matching bows and ribbons.

“Ah!” Dazai exclaims, “about time you noticed.”

“What is that?”

“A gift for you obviously. You should open it.”

There’s an unashamedly hopeful look on Chuuya’s face, and Dazai would laugh if he was any less polite.

When Chuuya doesn't make a move, Dazai kicks into action. He grabs the box and throws it clumsily at Chuuya who, courtesy of incredible reflexes, catches it although the angle is awkward.

He fiddles with the stick-on bow as though that's going to open the box. Dazai is losing his last thread of patience.

Walking over to Chuuya, purposefully making sure that his footsteps are heard, he grabs the box and tears the wrapping paper off with very little finesse.

A blue suit falls out like rustling autumn leaves. It lands on the floor with that distinct sound which thick crumbled up silk makes. On top of it falls a diamond choker necklace, which glitters like a kaleidoscope and reflects the faint sunlight like hundreds of little rainbows.

Everything is pretty.

Chuuya's face appears *particularly* pretty in the glittery rainbow light.

Or maybe - just maybe - Dazai hasn't gotten enough sleep lately.

He sighs because that's what sleep-deprived people do, and the little sound seems to awaken Chuuya from the daydream he must have been stuck in; his eyes suddenly become very sharp.

"What is this?" he asks, looking at the pile of clothing with an openly dubious look on his face.

"It's Alexandre's outfit for the auction night," Dazai explains. "Why do you look so surprised? You weren't planning on showing up in your own horrible fashion, were you?"

Chuuya scrunches his nose. His eyes fix on the diamond choker, which is still perched on top of the pile of clothing like a fiery beacon springing out of a blue sea.

"Was that diamond thingy really necessary," he asks, but it doesn't sound like scepticism in the least. It sounds like poorly veiled intrigue and an unarticulated longing for glittery things.

"Yes, absolutely necessary," Dazai replies easily - he does like to tell the unobscured truth sometimes.

"A-ha," Chuuya says, making it sound like a very insightful statement, almost like he's able to see through the very fabric of the universe to grasp the deeper meaning behind everything.

In one precise movement, he picks up the clothing and the diamond choker necklace from the floor and lays them on the sofa in a neat pile.

He glances over his shoulder, catching Dazai's eyes, as he straightens his back, arching it slightly. His hair falls over his shoulder in the most intriguing way.

“Let’s check out the bedroom.”

And then he’s off, gliding out of the room with the grace of a dancer, light on his toes and looking a lot like someone who’s out to break hearts.

Dazai blinks - once - twice, and in the space of time it takes for his eyes to register that he’s alone in the room, his brain manages to communicate the right signals to his body and his legs finally remembers that they're supposed to move.

He nearly trips over his own feet as he rushes into the bedroom, stumbles over the doorstep and slams into Chuuya who easily catches him - arms firmly wrapping around Dazai, who desperately tries to regain control of his dumb uncoordinated legs,

“One bed, huh?” Chuuya asks, sounding awfully amused, “I thought I told you that you should learn to just *ask* for things.”

“I’m not asking for anything. It would look suspicious if Shuji booked a room with two separate beds for him and his fiancé.”

“I see,” Chuuya murmurs, sounding remarkably unconvinced. “No ulterior motives?”

Dazai’s toes are itchy in his socks. “No,” is all he says.

"Liar," Chuuya says, but it doesn't sound like an accusation as much as a casual observation. He moves across the room and stops in front of the balcony door. For a moment he just stands there, silently observing the view.

Then he creaks the door open.

“Why, Chuuya? It’s *cold*,” Dazai complains.

“Very soon it won’t be.”

“O-ho, someone is confident.”

In the milliseconds it takes for Dazai to blink, Chuuya moves from his spot and right up in Dazai’s space.

“What’s wrong with being confident?” he says, his smile sharp like a knife - it cuts right into Dazai’s spine and leaves a bloody trail down his spine.

The world turns at an odd angle, spinning, turning. And then Dazai feels soft sheets beneath him and even softer lips against his own. A Kiss like ecstasy. Like nothing Dazai has ever experienced before; something that robs the clothes right of his body and leaves him feeling naked.

Dazai breaks the kiss for just a second to level Chuuya with a look. “You’re a thief, Chuuya,” he says feigning indignation, “stealing all my kisses like that.”

“Good,” Chuuya hums, leaning forward, chasing after Dazai to demand yet another one.

A firm press of lips. Unselfish possession. Maybe Chuuya isn't stealing anything - maybe he's offering.

Chuuya pulls back ever so slightly. "I want all of your kisses. I'll make sure there's nothing left for anyone else."

The words reverberate against Dazai's skin and multiply deep inside his body.

"Greedy," he comments, "but that's okay. I am too."

"Why don't you tell me more about that? What do you like?"

Dazai pouts. He knows that his likes and dislikes aren't particularly tasteful, and consequently, he doesn't like to talk about sex. He likes to take what he wants or find ways of communicating to others how to give it to him.

Figuring out how to feel and how to act is a chore and a half, so he usually sticks to a script and fakes the feelings that he thinks are supposed to go with the actions he performs. It's the curse of being too self-conscious to experience feelings first hand.

He mostly experiences things as an observer, looking at himself from afar, trying to deduce what someone who acts that way must be feeling. It never really works, at best he registers a hollow echo of what should have been a real response, at worst he feels nothing - the kind of nothing that feels like an acidic emptiness that gnaws away at his insides.

But Chuuya seems to be well integrated into his body. Like he's aware of every single sensation and feels every feather-light touch like a crushing impact inside his bones. The idea of experiencing his own pleasure through Chuuya seems appealing.

That's not a thing he wants to verbalise, though.

"It's complicated," is the answer he settles on, although he knows that it probably counts as a deflection rather than a proper explanation.

Chuuya doesn't respond. He merely bends his head to the side, looking as innocent as a puppy, waiting for a treat. And the longer he sits there with his big imploring eyes, the more long-suffering the moment becomes.

Dazai decides to let his hands do the talking. In a swift movement, he reaches out his hands, fingers twisting into Chuuya's shirt to drag him in a little closer.

He starts toying with the buttons, shaky hands struggling to open them one at a time.

Chuuya allows it but pats Dazai's thigh weakly. "Oi. Are you seriously trying to weasel your way out of talking about this?"

Dazai nods and completely ignores the withering look Chuuya gives him in favour of focusing his attention on the difficult task his fingers are occupied with.

Chuuya sighs. “Let me,” he says as he bats Dazai’s hands away to take over - except, instead of doing something about his own state of unacceptable overdress, he starts unbuttoning Dazai’s shirt, fingers flicking over buttons with lithe grace until it comes apart like a curtain.

He pulls it off in one swift motion and throws it away carelessly, and there’s just something very megalomaniac about how he's handling the situation. Something unhinged. Like Chuuya would destroy everything that gets in the way of what he wants.

Dazai takes mental notes that he adds to the near-endless ‘Chuuya file’ in his brain.

Chuuya stills for a moment, gaze raking up and down Dazai’s bandaged torso. A certain titillation composed of something Dazai is almost reluctant to analyse: The confident exterior that’s so solid that it’s almost inconceivable that it should have a mushy centre slowly cracks, giving way for a twitchy excitement.

And then there are those little glittery stars in his eyes. Dazai looks down at himself to check what’s so astonishing about a wrapped-up mummy that Chuuya should look so enthralled. He doesn’t see anything noteworthy.

“Hey there,” Chuuya says, and Dazai’s head snaps up.

“What?” Dazai croaks and notices begrudgingly that there’s a certain vulnerability to the ring of his voice.

“You’re cute.”

Dazai frowns. What a strange and unprompted thing to say - what an elusive concept. To be cute... more than just ‘strategically designed’. He doesn’t particularly want to finish that thought, but of course, that’s not a choice; it’s something that just happens, and so Dazai wants, *needs*, to rationalise Chuuya’s perception of things.

“I don’t think that this cuteness you talk about is much more than the objectification of desire,” he explains.

Chuuya shakes his head. “That’s ridiculous.”

“No it’s-”

“Shut up,” Chuuya leans forwards to plant a kiss on Dazai’s mouth and just like that, it becomes easy to let the discussion go. To unravel from nothing but lips against lips.

Chuuya’s palms are solid on Dazai’s back, holding him up like a scaffold even when Dazai thinks he might fall apart.

Chuuya breaks the kiss, and then, in the most infuriating gesture, bobs Dazai’s nose. “Very cute,” he says around a self-satisfied smirk.

Dazai shakes his head but doesn’t care to oppose the statement any further than that. His hands travel to Chuuya’s hair as he leans forward to claim Chuuya’s lips again.

Dazai's eyes are closed, but he still senses the minute change in air pressure and the small sounds of buttons coming undone. Dazai drops back to sit on his heels and observes as Chuuya drops his shirt. It's obvious that Chuuya isn't actively trying to put on a show, but he's naturally graceful in a way that just demands admiration.

White fabric falls from Chuuya's shoulders to reveal golden skin underneath. Skin that Dazai can't help but stare at like it's a particularly intricate piece of art - it's being engulfed in fiery flames by the last rays of sunshine that come in through the wide window.

Dazai would very much like to burn in that fire.

"Please, Chuuya…" Dazai wraps a sigh around the words, hoping that a breathless partner serves as a good motivation for small megalomaniacs, "do something."

Chuuya laughs. The sound rings like little bells, soundwaves vibrating in synchrony with Dazia's rapidly crumbling composure.

"Okay, since you're asking nicely." Chuuya agrees, leaning forward to plant yet another velvety kiss to Dazai's temple. It's unnecessarily gentle, and Dazai is cutting himself on the cotton-wool-like softness of it.

And he can't stand any more tenderness. He takes a firm hold of Chuuya's cheeks and forces their mouths together in a far less gentle kiss that Chuuya fiercely returns.

Too much teeth and tongue, and in his eagerness Dazai mindlessly bites Chuuya's lower lip. Hard enough to draw blood.

As someone who hates pain, he recognizes that what he has done is unfair and he makes a move to pull back, to break the kiss and hand Chuuya an apology, but Chuuya just grabs him harder and moans into the kiss, chasing the metallic, pushing it back into Dazai's mouth.

How interesting.

Lips continue to slide together and pull apart in a slow coordinated choreography as one of Dazai's hands slide down Chuuya's front. He can feel heat rising to his cheeks, and as warmth spreads through his body, his fingers start picking up the pace, cleverly undoing Chuuya's belt so he can sneak his hand in to cup Chuuya through his briefs.

Chuuya releases Dazai's mouth with a shuddering breath. He rolls his hips to meet Dazai's hand and starts pressing his lips just under Dazai's jaw, worshipping the sensitive skin while he too lets his fingers slither down, opening Dazai's trousers with a flick of his wrists.

"We need… to... these off," Chuuya speaks into Dazai's mouth. It's nothing more than an incoherent distortion of sounds with a faint clang of something that resembles real words, but somehow Chuuya still makes it sound like a non-negotiable demand. And then, because Chuuya has a unique talent when it comes to the physical realm, he - rather miraculously - accomplishes to get out of his trousers and underwear in the same breath as he also pulls Dazai's off.

They rock up against each other, a clumsy dance to the syncopated rhythm of their stuttering breaths. Dazai is embarrassingly worked up already - hips jerking automatically and heart threatening to beat out of his chest.

“Hey, what about these?” Chuuya asks, fingers tracing simple patterns over Dazai’s bandaged arms, “do you ever take them off?”

“Obviously,” Dazai answers, fingers digging into Chuuya’s shoulders and probably leaving half-moon like marks, “you think I shower with them on?”

“You know what I mean. Do they come off… around other people?”

Dazai sighs heavily, a bit over the top and dangerously close to sounding self-pitying, which he finds gross and unnecessary, but worth it for the dramatic effect. He scratches the bandage over his left wrist, chasing a long vertical line. “There have been people who have taken them off.”

Chuuya leans his head back and scans Dazai’s face with the most bothersome questioning look in his eyes. “That’s a weird way of phrasing it… ”

“Well that’s what happened,” Dazai replies, reaching out to grab Chuuya’s hair - meaning to pull his face down for their mouths to meet once again - going on the base instinct that: Kisses good. Talking bad.

Chuuya gently slaps Dazai’s hands away. “Were you okay with it?”

“Sure.”

“Okay,” Chuuya says, sounding uncertain. He even looks like someone who is treading muddy water, eyes a little too focused, and lips set in a worried line, “but what do you prefer? On or off?”

Dazai gazes down at his bandaged arms. As with almost everything, there are pros and cons to consider on both sides. The bandages are there for a number of reasons, and those are very hard to put into words.

“I have sensitive skin,” he says. It seems like a good enough response. A succinct point, which doesn’t quite hit the bullseye of the complicated reality of things but approximates it well enough.

Chuuya scratches the back of his head. “That sounds like a 'no'. That’s fine.”

“It’s not a 'no'. Sensitive can be good, you know,” Dazai comments as he unties the bandages where the ends are tucked-in by the wrists, and starts unravelling them.

He generally takes off his bandages the way he unwraps gifts: with a goal in sight and little to no patience. Still, he goes a little slower than he usually would, ready to abort if he sees any signs of disgust or discomfort on Chuuya's face.

He doesn’t. Chuuya radiates only eager curiosity and something much akin to hunger as the bandages come off.

It’s cold in the bedroom without the bandages, Dazai notices. He grabs Chuuya’s arms, to steady himself, to absorb some heat, to feel some sort of connection.

Chuuya lets a hand slide down to stroke Dazai's side for a moment, before it travels lower, running a teasing finger over the line of his cock. Dazai gasps, hips twitching to chase the touch. “Please,” he whispers without knowing what he’s asking for but knowing that he *needs*.

“Yes,” Chuuya whispers back into Dazai’s ear, but then his movements come to a rather abrupt and unappreciated stop. Dazai glares, and Chuuya sits back slightly. ”I just remembered that... uh...”

“Uh?”

“God, I’m so stupid. I don't know why I’m not prepared for this. I knew we would end up in bed together- I mean… uh, sorry if that sounded presumptuous- I was hoping this would happen and I should-”

“Oh!” Dazai exclaims when his anticipation hazed brain clears enough to understand what Chuuya is rambling about, “you’ll find what you’re looking for in the nightstand drawer.”

Chuuya's lips part, forming a little 'o'. Then they stretch into a secret little smile, and just like that, his apologetic face morphs into something very pleased.

“Oh really,” he shoots back, and if he’s attempting a smug glare, it’s ruined by how flushed his cheeks are. He throws a hand into the drawer and fumbles around for a few moments before retrieving the bottle of lube and throwing it haphazardly on the bed. “It almost sounds like you planned this.”

“I was just hoping. I’m allowed some optimism.”

Chuuya hums and puts his weight back on his heels. He uncaps the bottle with his thumb, and the small click sounds as promising as the doors to a treasure chamber being opened.

“How do you want to do this?” Chuuya asks.

It’s a fairly simple question to which Dazai has a fairly simple answer but absolutely no words that allow him to express it. Dazai's chin drops to his chest. There's a mysterious fluttery feeling in his lower rib cage that he avidly ignores as he lets out a blow of air. His eyes trail from the bottle in Chuuya’s hand, and all the way down that disgustingly attractive body: Chest, rising and falling in an unsteady cadence. Waist slim and forming a gentle arch, which leads to narrow hips. Cock, absolutely perfect in a way that makes Dazai’s head spin - hard, and curved, and dripping, and big, and thick, and just *begging* for attention.

Dazai is prone to overthinking, but it doesn't even require a fraction of an incomplete thought to decide that he needs to put his mouth on that glorious thing.

In a single fluid movement, he sits up, places his hands on both sides of Chuuya’s hips and bows forward to lick experimentally at the tip.

Chuuya gasps and his cock twitches. Dazai needs more.

So without permission, he goes all in. Fast but still deliberate; tongue first, sticking out to dig into the slit, lips then parting sliding down the shaft until his nose and lips brush against Chuuya’s groin.

Dazai hums contentedly when Chuuya grabs his hair, and the sound vibrates in his vocal cords.

Chuuya’s breath stutters. it sounds like he’s trying to say something but the words are getting caught in his throat.

What wonderful positive feedback.

Dazai closes his eyes and lets his tongue move against the underside of Chuuya's dick as he bobs his head up and down, ardently ignoring his gag reflex and relishing all of Chuuya’s reactions: The rough groans, the way his hips stutter as though he wants to lose control and push further, harder, rougher into Dazai’s mouth.

Dazai almost wishes he would.

“You’re good at this,” Chuuya breathes out, and Dazai’s skin prickles with a strange kind of electricity - like lightning about to strike. He swallows around Chuuya’s length and flexes his fingers around Chuuya’s hips.

“Fuck. Wait,” Chuuya stutters, “If you don’t stop, this is going to be over before we get to the main event.” Chuuya guides Dazai’s head back gently by tugging his hair.

There’s a string of spit between his lips and Chuuya's cock, which Chuuya’s eyes transfix on. Dazai wants to protest, to leap forward and swallow Chuuya down again, to take what he feels is rightfully his, but instead, he sits back on his heels patiently. He lowers his head slightly and purposefully makes his pupils dilate - the wonders of complete autonomic nervous system control.

“So,” Chuuya begins, an impatient edge to his voice, something wild and primal that appears to be fighting against his good manners, “how do you want to do thi-”

“But you’ve already asked that, Chuuya.” Dazai rolls his eyes playfully and slides flat down on his stomach, looking over his shoulder and tying a thousand unspoken requests into his gaze, fluttering his lashes like delicate fabrics that move in the hot winds of the summer.

Chuuya shakes his head. “You never actually answered. I don’t know why you expect me to be able to read your mind. Between the two of us, you’re the one who is supposed to have mind-reading abilities.”

Dazai groans into a pillow, the blood in his veins has been replaced with vinegar, and there’s pressure in his head. “You know what I want. Why can’t you just-”

“Why can’t you just say it?”

Dazai takes a deep breath and clears his head. He goes through all his memories, all the people he has been intimate with and all the tricks he has picked up. He could tailor his behaviour to Chuuya specifically, but the problem is that Chuuya’s tastes involve a certain brand of authenticity that doesn’t come easily to Dazai.

Dazai lets out a shaky exhale as he resigns himself to the next best option, which is the usual persona he adopts in bed.

He flips around so he’s on his back and reaches for Chuuya’s shoulder, slowly dragging him closer. He then stretches up the last couple of inches, mouth nearly touching Chuuya's.

"Won't you fuck me, Chuuya?” he whispers, pitching his voice just right, half-whisper and half whine, “please? Chuuya, please. Please fuck me-"

“Oh my *God*.” Chuuya disentangles himself from Dazai’s death grip and slaps Dazai’s thigh. He’s wearing the most disconcerted look, but it quickly transforms into something more neutral - something more understanding.

Dazai fingers are itching to destroy something. Preferably himself.

“Chuuya-”

“Yes, yes. *Fine*. No more talking about this. I’ll fuck you and you,” he points an accusatory finger at Dazai, “please don’t fake it.”

Dazai is going to cry. Or he would if he were anymore shameless. Instead, he smiles and bounces back on his stomach, infinitely grateful for not having to cause a semantic apocalypse (only without words, his favourite weapon, can he allow himself to let his guard down - he can’t put up a fight when he’s unarmed).

Dazai’s head is turned to the side and he’s staring blankly into the unlit lamp on top of the nightstand. He can’t see what's happening, but he can hear it: Chuuya’s breath, the lube drizzling over fingers, his heartbeat, the way his muscles flex as he moves.

Dazai inhales sharply at the contact of the cold, a wet finger against his rim. The tip presses in and tugs at the muscle, moving with aching, almost offensive, carefulness.

He wriggles his hips - a demand more than an invitation, which Chuuya must understand because he pushes his finger in to the second knuckle, crooks it just right and presses down on Dazai’s prostate.

Dazai quivers, hands tightening to fists in the sheets and eyes closing to enjoy the internal scenery, colours flashing in his visual cortex with every press of Chuuya’s finger.

Strange sound effects - something quite like reversed echos rings in his ears as a second finger joins the first. Hot pleasure pools in his stomach. It stands in sharp contrast to the cool temperature in the bedroom and to the fine precision with which Chuuyas starts prodding his fingers.

Dazai lets out a trembling exhale, a broken sound dragged from the back of his throat.

“You like this, don’t you?” Chuuya asks, and the question has a cutting edge to it - one that unfortunately isn’t mirrored by how he scissors he’s fingers.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Dazai sighs, words falling from his lips automatically, blending with the most erotic moans he knows how to produce.

Chuuya leans forward and places a butterfly-like kiss on Dazai's spine. It’s wet and way-too-much and wonderful.

“Was that... an honest answer?” It sounds like he is searching for a conclusion to a very complicated question.

Maybe he is, but that's fine. Dazai is nothing if not capable of analysing complex issues. He turns his head to meet Chuuya’s eyes and offers a tentative, “yes.” - and it is true; of all the signals his body is sending his brain, none of them are negative.

Chuuya beams, his expression not even trying to mask the pride that’s so evident in his eyes. Dazai doesn’t know how to feel about it, but he does squash down his first instinct to dismiss it as a dumb display of misplaced sentimentality.

A short shared smile, a moment of rampant vulnerability and then Dazai pushes back, body loosening around Chuuya's fingers, arching for more.

“You look so good like this," Chuuya whispers as he softly kisses Dazai’s thigh. A soft kiss which very quickly turns into something untamed; wet and messy, as he alternates between biting and licking the sting away.

His free hand digs in to to the meat of Dazai’s ass to spread him open as he pushes a third finger in. He moves deliberately, spreading and flexing his fingers in a slow but even rhythm - then curls them down to press into Dazai's prostate.

The warm pool of pleasure in Dazai’s stomach is bubbling like lava, and a muted whine catches in his throat as the sensation floods him. His thighs shake, and he’s torn between whether he should play dead or go completely feral: let himself be pliant and just take it or push into the touch.

Chuuya runs his free hand down Dazai’s side, something ravenous yet sweet about it.

Dazai feels the touch as a trail of radioactivity, fingertips like sharp needles where they meet his skin - it’s like getting branded.

He tilts his hips forward, shamelessly chasing a bit of friction as his hands grip the sheets so hard that they almost start cramping, knuckles turning white and tremor intensifying. He's so aware of everything - he can see himself as though he is watching a movie on a screen, and he’s very conscious of how needy he looks. He can’t find it in himself to be ashamed though. Shame is for lonely nights when he feels like he’s disappearing -it’s not something he wants to get distracted by when he’s with Chuuya.

“Please,” He whispers again, an understated request for everything Chuuya is willing to give him, a plea that bears real heartbreaking potential. He wonders fleetingly if Chuuya is even aware of how powerful he is.

“Are you sure you’re ready, don’t wanna-”

“Yes.”

“Okay, turn. Wanna look at your pretty face.”

What a ridiculous thing to say. Still, Dazai is too worked up to laugh at the absurdity of it and too impatient to try and pick an argument.

He flops over and it probably isn’t as elegant as he could wish for, but he hopes it comes across as sufficiently princess-like. He lays back into the fluffy pillows, opens his legs further and observes with hooded eyes as Chuuya slithers forward, moulding himself against Dazai’s body like the other piece of a puzzle. Dazai’s entire body fizzles, every point of contact sets his nervous system into overload, and he just melts.

“Come on, Chuuya. *Need you*,” he purrs, and Chuuya nods. He looks desperate, hair sticking out and eyes wild, pupils so blown that they almost swallow the blue of his irises. It’s a gorgeous look on him.

A stray breeze comes in the window. It blows fresh air on Dazai's overheated skin and he shakes his head desperately. He wants to feel everything, and he wants it so bad that it cuts right through him - he's completely overwhelmed and twitching with the mixed up sensations. Hot, cold, pain, pleasure, *Chuuya*.

Chuuya lines himself up, grabs Dazai’s hips and digs his thumbs in.

Dazai licks his lips absently. He's feeling that distinct need to hold on to something, so he reaches for Chuuya’s shoulders.

Chuuya pushes in. it’s slick and slow and just... So. Very. Much.

Dazai can feel every millimetre of Chuuya’s cock as it sinks into him, feel himself convulsing around it, feel the pleasure in his bones growing into a blazing storm.

“*Yes*,” He whispers as he digs his nails into Chuuya’s skin and stirs to try and take more of Chuuya’s cock.

Chuuya finally bottoms out. His hips are flush against Dazai's ass, and his breath comes out in short staccato puffs.

Blood surges through Dazai's veins, oxygenating every cell of his being with pure ecstasy. He's exhausted already, strung out from feeling so much, but it’s the best kind of fatigue, a contentedness that washes over him and hugs him like a warm blanket. He closes his eyes and allows himself to let out an unrestrained sigh (which, strangely, sounds more like a wanton moan to his own ears).

“Fuck. You’re perfect,” Chuuya breathes, as he starts to roll his hips in small experimental movements, slow undulations, the drag so perfect that it has Dazai seeing stars; little shiny things that dance around in his visual field. And still, it’s not enough.

“I need...” he pants, loosening his grip around Cuuya’s shoulders, no longer bothering to exert the energy required to hold his arms up and instead throws them up over his head.

Chuuya pulls Dazai’s knees up and leans forward to rock into him. The motion tilts Dazai’s hips just right, shifting Chuuya's cock inside him and pushing all the air out of his lungs on a strangled moan. It’s like being punched in the gut, except it sends shockwaves of passion thought his body rather than pain.

He writhes and twists with very little leverage as Chuuya sets a rhythm, fucking into him at a slow pace with brutal precision, hitting Dazai’s prostate over and over again. The pleasure builds gradually, like a rising tide that slowly washes over Dazai until he can barely breathe, and he needs to focus on just keeping his head above water.

“Nnnngh,” he pants incoherently as the magnetism that dances in his veins sends signals through his body that makes his hips jerk automatically. The fire in his stomach is swallowing him whole, spreading through his balls and dripping cock, which twitches against his stomach.

Chuuya pulls out and thrusts back in hard, forcing a broken sob from Dazai's throat. He trembles in Chuuya’s hold and his toes curl as the muscles of his legs pull tighter, and Chuuya soothes a hand over them, thumb sliding back and forth across Dazai's inner thigh.

He then moves his hands to thread his fingers through Dazai’s hair, leaning forward, almost collapsing on top of Dazai as he starts moving, pulsating his hips in short little bursts, still somehow, in a genius way finding the perfect angle that drives Dazai absolutely off the rails.

He spreads his legs even further and pushes up against Chuuya, his leaking cock trapped between their bodies, and twitching every time Chuuya moves against him, in him, with him. Rocking like gentle waves in a deep blue ocean.

Chuuya offers open-mouthed sloppy kisses, wet upon Dazai’s neck.

“You’re taking it so well,” he murmurs against Dazai’s skin, and those words feel like kisses too. His fingers brush Dazai’s cheek with a tenderness that feels like a curse - *ruined for everyone else*.

Dazai’s heart beats like it wants to escape his ribcage and aches with every single one of Chuuya’s thoughtful touches, the attentiveness so gentle, yet as overwhelming as a free fall.

And of the not very many ways known of forgetting one's brain and body, falling seems to be the most magnificent method.

Chuuya starts thrusting harder again. Dazai’s chest heaves, and his cock strains between them. “Chuuya, please.”

And Chuuya must recognise the desperation in the way his name is whispered because he picks up the pace, fucking Dazai with abandon, hard and fast.

His nails scratch across scarred skin, and it stings in the most perfect way imaginable - an excellent counterpoint to the sweet pastel pink liquidy pleasure that's devouring Dazai from the inside.

Dazai's hips move on their own accord, completely without input from his brain, and it's eerie but he can't care because the small movements create the most exquisite friction. Chuuya's mouth drops to Dazai's neck, lavishing attention on the sensitive skin, teeth gracing and searching out areas of sensitivity.

Dazai shivers into the touch, squeezes his eyes shut as broken sounds escape his lips, transforming into sobs at the end of each exhale. He spreads himself impossibly wider, just wanting to feel more, to savour everything and anything Chuuya is willing to give him. He can feel Chuuya's smile against his own skin, and Dazai wants that too. Unashamed of his own greediness he tips his head forward, in a silent request that Chuuya answers immediately, kissing Dazai's lips like they're special, and It feels like crying. Wet and cathartic.

Chuuya continues the brutal pace as he groans into Dazai's slack mouth. He sounds like he's about to break. Like he's balancing spinning plates. Like he's expecting everything to come crashing down around him.

And Dazai sympathises.

He groans and lets his head fall back into the pillows, high on desire and starved for more as his muscles twitch painfully tight around Chuuya's cock, and he tries to meet every thrust.

It's a frenzy of possession and surrender; an endlessly deep yearning to have every last particle of his flesh consumed. He longs to be nothing more than a smudge of colourless fluff, completely unburdened by awareness, merely there extended in space.

Dazai's mind turns foggy, everything slightly unfocused, edges blurred out.

It's a precipice that he's heading straight for at lightning speed.

"Please," he whispers. He needs it so much his bones ache. So much he hurts inside.

Chuuya pushes in again, hard and deep. A pleasure offered by Chuuya's warmth is a pleasure made of liquid sunsets.

Dazai's mouth parts on a soundless cry as he just breaks; body completely consumed as the orgasm runs over him like a tidal wave, a blazing desire moving through him and leaving him utterly boneless. He can no longer feel himself - he's disintegrated. Only the whispers of a body possessed remains as he writhes and trembles through it.

Black dots swim in his vision, and white noise rings in his ears. It's enough to bring him into the vibrancy of the moment, all of his thoughts on blessed pause.

Yes, everything stills until the world consists of nothing more than Chuuya's tight embrace and the way he moans Dazai's name as he tips over the edge and comes too.

Dazai sighs and feels the last bits of his fragmented consciousness leave his body with that puff of air.

And the moment is all.

Everything is enough.

"Are you okay?" Chuuya's voice registers as the sweetest sound to Dazai's ears. It takes him a while to parse them together and figure out what they mean. Reality still presents itself at a rather bizarre off-angle, senses not quite unified enough to draw a coherent picture of what is going on (mostly everything just appears pastel pink and wonderful). Still, those words are spoken so sincerely, so sweetly - like something that waters flowers.

"Am I okay?" He repeats, tasting those astonishing words for himself, "why wouldn't I be? I'm a pastel pink puddle, and nothing hurts."

"Shh, you're talking nonsense, angel."

"Yeah… I think you broke me a little. And I can't explain what I mean, but even if I could, I'm not sure I'd feel like it."

Chuuya kisses his temple. "That's fair," he says.

And that seems to be the end of that conversation.

Dazai closes his eyes and nestles himself against Chuuya's chest. "I'm not getting dressed again. Let's order room service and eat dinner in bed."

Chuuya's fingers gently thread through Dazai's hair. "Fine by me. Whatever you want."

Dazai snickers. "And when room service knocks on the door, you'll answer it."

"Okay," Chuuya agrees simply.

What a peaceful creature.

A loud knock on the door interrupts the delicate moment.

"Huh?" Chuuya shoots Dazai a bewildered look. "But we haven't even ordered yet."

Dazai shrugs, eyes closing again and lips stretching into a blissful smile. "You said you'd answer the door. I'm not moving."

Chuuya grumbles something under his breath, but his warm presence does shift as he moves from the bed. Dazai tries not to notice how pathetically he misses the proximity when the

mattress no longer dips just right next to him.

He hears Chuuya's quick footsteps against the wood floor, the door creaking open and then, a few moments later, Chuuya's returning food steps.

"Someone left a letter for Shuji Tsushima and Alexandre de Luynes outside the door."

"Wonderful," Dazai says, "that'll be our invitation for the auction tomorrow, aren't you excited, chérie?"

Chapter End Notes

Chapter notes:

- Kogane no Kani isn't a real restaurant. It's just one that I made up. It means "The Golden Crab"
- I decided to put a lot of cat statues in the hotel for no reason other than it amused me.

Can I just say... Writing Dazai is hard in general but writing sex from Dazai's point of view is very very hard 😅

Also, this is fic is not betaed. I sincerely apologise for any mistakes. I try so hard, but I'm very dyslexic and sometimes catching spelling and grammar mistakes is hard for me.

I love kudos and comments. This chapter nearly killed me, so please leave a comment and let me know if you enjoyed it. it would mean the world to me 💕

Come say hi on twitter

8. Priorities... or something like that

Chapter Summary

> & blood-warm / the voyeuristic thrill / of
> owning something / by being inside it / now I am beautiful / surgery in your
> grand / invention finally made real / because you stroked me / with ink-damp
> hands
>
> - Natalie Wee

Chapter Notes

> Hi loves.
>
> Remember me? It's been a while, huh? This took forever because I'm an insecure perfectionist and couldn't Get It Right.
> Well, Now - finally - 500 drafts and edits later, I'm feeling semi-confident - so here we go. Chapter 9. Hope you enjoy 💞
>
> As always, THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING (and all the kudos and nice words. OMG I'm sobbing. Thank you so much!)
>
> ---
>
> Content warning: implied self-harm and sensory overload

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Sinking Cloud isn’t Dazai’s new favourite gallery, but it does live up to its artistic name - there is a sinking aura to the place.

The ceiling is low and painted a pastel blue that’s so light that it might look white to the untrained eye, dreary oil-paintings with depressing colour are palettes packed rather tastelessly close on the walls and display-stands shoot up from the dark hardwood floor in perfectly orthogonal lines with even space between each.

The place reminds Dazai of a chessboard; patrons in hideous couture looking for all the world like pawns and his steady heartbeat ringing in his ear like a mechanical clock - counting every move, every second.

He runs a hand through his hair, and hums a note under his breath, feeling the vibrations echoing through his skull. An attempt at self-soothing... or something like that.

Still, everything is too bright and too poignant (it always is). The smell of money and anti-wrinkle cream itches in Dazai's nose. The too-large-to-be-tasteful chandeliers bathe the room in crystalline shapes and send his visual sense into a kaleidoscope of queasiness.

He allows himself a single moment of self-pity: closes his eyes for just one second; soaks in the darkness behind his closed eyelids - tries to cling to it as he opens them again. The room is spinning, slightly but surely. It feels a little blurry around the edges - like dark blue watercolour bleeding into a canvas.

Whatever. It's nothing he can't ignore. Nothing he isn't used to. And so, smiles brightly at nothing and no one in particular - because he's perfectly fine.

He toys absently with the gold chain-strap of the quilted bag that hangs over his shoulder. Just to occupy his hands - just a dumb habit. He's aware of it. He has no plans to change it. It's fine.

Chuuya nudges his shoulder, discreetly. "Everything okay, Daz-?"

"*Shuji*, yes, that's me," Dazai quickly cuts in before Chuuya can break their cover, "and yes, Alex, mon chérie, everything's fine."

"Figured," Chuuya grumbles, clearly not enjoying having his almost-mistake corrected. It's an unusual display of childishness on his part, which Dazai can't help but think he himself must have inspired.

He's stuck between feeling proud and horrified by his own contagiousness but makes the executive decision to settle on amusement. He lets the feeling sink into his chest, makes it inflate until he feels lightheaded and, if not pleasant, at least considerably uplifted.

"Thanks for asking though," he adds, sending Chuuya a sugary look as he batts his eyelashes, "my fiance is so sweet and attentive."

Chuuya rolls his eyes but does ease the gesture with a smile. It's bright. Everything about him is bright. The sparkling diamond choker around his neck catches the colour of his the tight cerulean suit and glitters like sunlight reflected in a bottomless ocean. His eyes somehow even deeper, brighter, bluer.

Dazai stares until he becomes aware of doing so, and then promptly looks away (he can't allow himself to dwell too long on the blitz of brightness that is Chuuya Nakahara - he has sensitive eyes, after all).

His eyes settle on a large aquarium, which spans almost the entire length of the far end wall. In terms of business strategy, Dazai finds it rather suboptimal to take away display space for the sake of fish - fish that aren't for sale - but he does enjoy watching the little slippery things as they glide through the water. More than he enjoys looking at the very uninteresting Still-Lebens on the opposite wall.

He strides up to the aquarium, moves gingerly, breathes lightly, always so drawn by the strange allure of water. Chuuya follows right behind him, faint presence of familiar footsteps like a comforting shadow.

Up close the fish look even more enticing, scales shimmering with tactile appeal.

“I should get a fish,” Dazai says as his eyes trace a particularly perky koi fish, which appears to be attempting to summersault through a decorative sea anemone.

“Yeah, you’ve mentioned wanting a fish before.”

“I have,” Dazai muses, shamefully pleased that Chuuya remembers, “I’d name it Rain.”

Chuuya hums, smiling privately as he glances at Dazai sidelong. “In terms of pets, fish are kind of boring, aren’t they?”

Dazai shrugs. “I’m sure they make very good conversation partners.”

“You can’t talk to them?” Chuuya returns.

Dazai meets the conjecture with a mild roll of his eyes and silence because he knows better.

“Can’t I?” he asks, making sure to frame the question like an accusation as his eyes drift to level Chuuya with a look.

Chuuya blinks. “I mean... you *can,* but fish don’t listen.”

It's not unkind, and it's not untrue. Still, Dazai can’t help but notice the mild twinge in his stomach at the implication.

“Excellent〜 I Don't ever want to tell anybody anything anyway,” he singsongs, the words made of little silver bells that send vibrations of acidic energy through the airwaves between them.

Chuuya’s right eye twitches, and he makes a disgruntled little sound, air blowing out of his nose in a huff. The expression on his face is something that would be indecipherable to most people, a patchworky little thing that might look a little like concern, irritation and longing mixed together - Dazai knows what it is though. It’s that distinct ‘I want to grab your shoulders and shake some sense into you’ look that Chuuya has personalised and perfected.

It’s a look that Dazai is very capable of ignoring. “Alright, Alex, mignon-darling. Let’s have a little wander around and check out the place〜”

Chuuya tilts his head and purses his mouth in a way that just screams disapproval.

How very like him to want to talk about feelings and get all cranky when he can’t.

Dazai pats Chuuya’s shoulder and then shifts his weight slightly, leaning forward to whisper into Chuuya’s ear. “Don’t look so grumpy, *partner*. We’re on a mission. You’re supposed to act like my lovelorn fiancé.”

Chuuya shoots Dazai a miffed glare but doesn't say anything. Dazai considers it an argument won and smiles welcomely to his victory.

He doesn't expect Chuuya to hold on to his negativity for long anyway - his emotions change so rapidly.

Dazai keeps half an eye on Chuuya as they filter through the room aiming for the large double doors which Dazai assumes will take them to the main exhibition room (if the inpouring of noise and fluorescent lights that flow in from the door-opening is any indication). He observes as Chuuya's features slide like rain on a window, transforming from something displeased to something more neutral - and then into something curious, almost delighted as he starts paying attention to the art pieces around them.

"Oi, Daz-*Shuji*," he whispers as he discreetly tugs on Dazai's sleeve. "You know stuff about art, right? What's your opinion on that thing?" He points eagerly to a sculpture, which looks like a cross between a frog and a rabbit. The peculiar creature has a pipe stuck between its lips and a fedora perched on top of its head, long ears sticking out underneath.

Dazai guesses it's the hat that has Chuuya seeming so beguiled.

He considers that art piece a second longer. "I don't get it," he then reveals although it feels like admitting ignorance, and that is always a hard lump to swallow - one that tends to get stuck in his throat and create the most frightful choking feeling.

Chuuya's eyes don't leave the sculpture when he says, "I don't think there's much to get."

Dazai squints at Chuuya. Then moves his eyes to behold the monstrous frog-rabbit, again. For a whole millisecond, he wonders if Chuuya is hinting at something - if there's a hidden meaning in his statement, waiting to be deciphered.. but he decides that Chuuya is just being Chuuya. His taste in fashion is deplorable, it's not exactly surprising that his taste in art would be just as unsophisticated.

"It's very unique," Dazai says, mostly just to say something. Still, it sounds *right*. A thought takes form in his mind, like the strings of a guitar resonating in tune to a familiar chord. Nothing that can be articulated, but still important. "I think I like it."

They pass through the main exhibition room in companionable silence, Dazai humming a tune under his breath and ignoring the repugnant smell of 18-carat gold and dirty money that seems to exude from everywhere while Chuuya looks just a little too alert and not quite enough like a rich aristocrat who only thinks thoughts that relate directly to vintage wines with long and fancy unpronounceable names, classical music (specifically the french golden eras preludes) and, of course, fine arts.

And so, Dazai makes a sacrifice. Or something like that.

He reaches for Chuuya's gloved hand and takes it in his own. Holds it... gently... like a lover would.

He looks straight ahead and tunes out the rush of blood in his veins, which is so turbulent that he can hear it louder than the clinking of champagne glasses and monotonous social chitchat around them.

Deep inhale. Deep exhale. Focus is everything - he needs to hold himself together. He very deliberately tunes out the information that bombards his brain from all direction: He ignores it when he sees Chuuya smiling in his peripheral vision. Ignores it when he feels his hand being squeezed. Ignores it when the same hand starts feeling a little sweaty. Unacceptable. Gross.

The body can't win he repeats to himself like a mantra as he violently enforces a homeostatic balance by sheer willpower. The confusion is brimming and sloshing inside him like an ocean in a glass. Yet, he keeps his head above water: He holds Chuuya's hand. He straightens his back just right, adding that little curve to his spine that makes him look more mature than he has ever cared to feel. He looks the other guests in the eyes and smiles. He even winks at everyone who seems like they might be even remotely charmed by that kind of thing.

His eyes, as always, search out little islands of comfort in the sea of overwhelm, and so, they happen to fall on the refreshments table rather quickly. He moves towards it in purposeful strides, following its magnetic pull.

The champagne looks as bubbly and delicious as ever when he delicately picks up a glass, holding it by the stem (the way Kouyou taught him) and offers it to Chuuya.

Chuuya accepts it with a grateful nod of his head - holds it like it's a plastic cup of cheap corner store sake.

It's… oddly endearing.

Sure, rich, snobbish people like Alexandre d'Albert de Luynes, are supposed to look bored and disengaged even when enjoying overpriced liquor and if Chuuya doesn't stop looking so dazzled it's going to blow their cover.

Dazai can't bring himself to comment on it though.

He lifts the crystal glass to his lips in a slow fluid motion, gentle contact - almost like a soft kiss. He inhales the aroma and takes a gentle sip, enjoying the warm pleasant effects of the alcohol. Like a warm, heavy blanket of comfort that wraps around his hollow bones.

"*So*," he says importantly, words tasting like the bubbles on his tongue, "let's go find our painting."

Chuuya nods sharply and there's a serious lift to his brows. He still looks too much like a man on a mission and not enough like an art snob who's on a date with his beloved fiance. It's not the ideal look for the occasion. It's not rich and lovey-dovey. It's not striking. It's not on point - which, Dazai does feel the need to comment on.

"Try not to attract suspicion," he comments as he takes another refined sip of his drink. Head tilted back slightly, nose toward the sky.

“Sure,” Chuuya huffs. “Although, I don’t know why you’re telling *me* that, I’m pretty good at keeping a low profile.”

Dazai blinks. It’s too late to explain to Chuuya that keeping a low profile means staying in character - even if that requires seemingly high-profile antics.

So instead, he settles for teasing Chuuya for his complete misreading of things. “Oh, but you’re wearing the most attention-demanding outfit I’ve ever seen.”

“That you bought for me,” Chuuya intones flatly.

“Yeah, and I’m *very* happy with the purchase,” Dazai chippers, voice as flowery as it always is when he’s about to hide a truth in plain sight, “I’m just saying It’s very hard not to look at you when you look so pretty. You’ve got quite a romantic figure, you know? And this lovely suit accentuates it~”

Chuuya breathes in sharply through his nose as his cheeks turn a soft pink. He looks at his feet. Looks anywhere, but at Dazai.

“You think?” he asks. And it’s a dumb question because although Dazai occasionally - routinely even - says things that have very little basis in the truth, he doesn’t have much to gain from lying about liking the way Chuuya looks in his blue suit. It’s just a very good suit, is the thing, and why should Dazai shy away from a harmless truth like that?

“Yeah. You look absolutely magnifique, mon amour,” Dazai croons, words laced with suggestion and loud enough for nearby patrons to hear it.

Chuuya’s eyes widen, a look on his face which suggests he's fighting a desperate battle against the urge to slap a hand over Dazai’s mouth. “*What was that about not attracting too much attention?* ” he hisses through his teeth.

Dazai grins and slings an arm around Chuuya’s shoulder. He’s about to go in for a cheek kiss (because that’s something someone in love would do, and Shuji is supposed to be completely enamoured with his fiance, isn't he?) but Chuuya brutally palms Dazai’s face and pushes him away.

“Paws off,” he rustles, “isn’t this exactly the kind of thing you’re not supposed to do? People are *looking*.”

Dazai knows. His instincts are always on high alert; it’s not like he can’t feel their little prickly eyes on him like small sharp teeth that pierce through layers of clothes and bandages, the constant reminder that he’s being stared at.

It’s okay. There’s nothing for them to see as long as he’s pretending to be someone else.

“Hmm?” Dazai hums into Chuuya’s ear, lips almost close enough to touch. He lets a finger slide down Chuuya's arm, a slow drift that he knows is just on the painful side of tender - specifically designed to set off Chuuya’s nervous system.

It's subtle, but it seems to get the job done: it startles the champagne cleanout of Chuuya's previously frowning mouth.

Dazai smiles in a half-hearted, fake modest attempt to cover up the fact that this is deliberate torture.

He sighs dramatically. "I just wanted to be a little affectionate with my beloved fiance."

It earns him a thwack, and then Chuuya grabs his hand firmly. "Here, have some affectionate hand-holding," he drips, clutching Dazai's hand a little ungently.

They filter through the relatively dense crowd of guests - a compact forest of muted colours, expensive glittery accessories and heavy perfumes blending and blurring together.

Dazai peaks into the adjoining room, before entering. The Great Wave is displayed as the centrepiece, right in the heart of a long white wall. It's the only painting on the wall too - which isn't surprising. It's clearly one of the main attractions of the evening.

There's live piano music playing. Sounds a bit like an attempt to make Wagner soulful and light. Positively dreadful.

Dazai wrinkles his nose (although, that's the wrong sensory input channel and sadly it does very little in terms of making the sound go away).

"Security dude at ten o'clock," Chuuya half whispers as he presses closer against Dazai and turns his back so he's mostly hidden behind the door opening.

Dazai's eyes jump to the security guard, scanning him up and down. "A big loaf of bread that one. Very attractive."

Chuuya snorts. "That's your type?"

Dazai shrugs. It's not - Chuuya ought to know that, he's asking stupid questions again.

"You're clear on the plan?"

"Of course," Chuuya answers, looking a bit offended - probably by the unspoken implication that he might not be. Dramatic.

"Good. Let's get you changed into your security uniform."

『○』

Luckily there's no line to the bathrooms. Dazai does a quick inventory and then selects the biggest most opulent looking one - the one with enough floor space to host a dance party and candlesticks illuminating the space in dancing shadows.

He drags Chuuya along with him before he slams the door shut and locks it.

The little click as he turns the key seems to bounce off every single reflective surface in the room - like an elongated echo that sings of sweet nothings and whispered promises that Dazai hopes he can fulfil. He hears it in the marble floor and counter, the glass and gold, the nouveau-rich panic that's so evident in the unnecessary and unmatching silver details in the wallpaper.

He spins to face Chuuya, who stands in the middle of the room looking rather amusedly perplexed.

“So.. I thought you were going to wait outside. But okay. If you wanna look at me while I get changed, that’s fine.”

Dazai smiles brightly. The kind of smile he wears when he’s pretending that he knows what he’s doing but actually doesn’t. A rare thing, that he hardly ever has to pull out from his repertoire, but tonight, it seems, is a special night.

“Nothing I haven’t seen before,” he says simply, his voice betraying nothing of the fidgety turmoil that pulsates in his head.

“Right,” Chuuya agrees. Distracted. He unlocks the clasp of the diamond necklace. It’s a wonderful pose; back slightly arched and head tilted forward to expose the back of his neck.

Dazai wants to learn how to paint - just to paint Chuuya when he posses so effortlessly. Wants to pour liquid gold over his body. Wants to cherish it. Wants to… bite it?

And Dazai is good at ignoring his instincts, but he is curious to see what happens if he doesn’t. He rather suspects that he'll get rewarded. Chuuya is the kind of person who will give out gold stars for a bit of impulsivity.

The blue suit jacket glides from Chuuya’s shoulders like a waterfall, and the thin see-through silk shirt he wears underneath provides a perfect peek-view to his shoulders. Skin just underneath the fabric, perfect for kissing and almost within reach.

The dim candlelight reflects in the pearly buttons of Chuuya’s shirt as they come undone one by one, like a game of 'he loves me, he loves me not'.

Chuuya clearly isn’t paying attention to Dazai as he undresses, clever hands removing his clothing in quick deliberate movements. He probably has no idea how casually cruel his effortless beauty is.

And Dazai has to do something about it, he frantically, unreasonably, wants to let Chuuya know every single thing that’s on his corrupt mind... but only if he can do it without actually saying a single thing out loud.

One step forward, fancy, shiny shoes squeaky and inappropriately loud in the mellow quietness as he strolls up to Chuuya, hands tingling. He leans forward, and bites (gently, he’s not a complete animal) into a perfect patch of skin. He tastes the gravity on his tongue, *For the Tainted Sorrow* like pure ecstasy as the ability drains out of Chuuya with the touch.

Chuuya takes in a sharp inhale, a quit little shiver like a wave of electromagnetism pulled from his nullified gravitational core. Dazai never knew the laws of physics to have such magical properties - it's something he needs to explore further.

"Let me help you undress."

Chuuya spins around in one fluid motion, leans back against the counter, posture open and inviting, eyes washed aglow in the pleasant yellow light and smile sharper than any razor blade Dazai has ever held in his hands - it cuts right through his will to act civilised.

Chuuya reaches out. Drags Dazai in by his hair and murmurs quietly into the heavy magnetic space between, "tu peux m'aider à me déshabiller…. mais d'abrod… puis-je vous embrasser??"

"Why are you even asking?"

Chuuya makes a frustrated sound and pushes Dazai firmly up against the wall, head framed by two wall candlesticks as the flames flicker, creating flickering shadow across Chuuya's face.

"You're annoying and so fucking gorgeous," Chuuya whispers.

Dazai doesn't know what to say to that, it seems to be merely a regular statement of opinion, so it shouldn't be such a struggle to come up with a witty reply.

"I am?" is what comes out of his mouth in the end, "um… I mean- I?" he gropes awkwardly, managing only to produce disjointed phrases. His trusted silver tongue usually doesn't have to struggle so hard to conjure up some poetic nonsense, but for some reason, the right words won't come to him.

Maybe it's for the better - he gets the feeling that if he could find the words to express how he feels, they'd just end up causing a semantic apocalypse - too much, too honest. He shuts his mouth tight.

Chuuya starts laughing, and Dazai doesn't know if he should be offended or flattered. "What, what? Am I that funny?" he asks, as he steadies himself by grabbing hold of Chuuya's shoulders and digging his nails in *hard*.

He's allowed a little passive aggression.

Chuuya's eyes burn like laser beams, leaving a burning hot trail from Dazai's eyes to his mouth.

"Yeah," Chuuya says around a sparkling smile, "it's kinda funny that you don't have a smartass comeback. First time that ever happened to you?"

"Shut up," Dazai says weakly.

Chuuya grins. "But you're the one who doesn't have anything to say. *You* shut up."

“Make me,” Dazai retorts - because it’s the obvious thing to say, and Chuuya complies instantly, crashing his mouth against Dazai and swallowing every single sound before it’s even produced.

Dazai lets it all happen, allows himself to fall apart, only clinging with minimum effort to the edges of his usual facade of control.

And the sounds Chuuya makes harmonize so splendidly - like an avant-garde, off-key symphony that soars though Dazai. A melody that will haunt him.

Chuuya hand flex against Dazai a firm push as their mouths part and reunite again, tounges sliding together, uncoordinated, chaotic. Perfect.

Dazai sighs into the kiss. It seems that Chuuya treats him with the same kind of eager frustration he would pour over an empty bottle of wine - clinging to it regardless of its emptiness, insisting on wringing out every last drop. And Dazai knows all too well that there’s nothing but a barren wasteland inside of him, but if Chuuya wants to claim him, he’ll get to.

Chuuya moves his body in the most wondrous ways. One hand in Dazai’s hair tugging just on the right side of rough, and the other sliding from Dazai’s shoulder and down his waist to pull him closer, bodies meeting like a wave crashing against a rock.

Dazai dissolves, and Chuuya stands steady.

Chuuya ever so purposeful, and disciplined. As though every feeling, thought sensation pours into his movements and adorns them with an uncomparable emotional grace.

Dazai wants to be able to do that too. To spill the intensity of every disparaging, awful, depressing feeling in his disconnected thing of a body into the kiss and mould it into something *good*.

He slides down to his knees and looks up at Chuuya through his lashes. Waiting.

Not for approval exactly, but for some kind of sign. Instead of answering the unspoken request though, Chuuya just blinks back at him.

How unhelpful. Dazai lets his head loll on one shoulder because he’s running out of steam and he can’t be bothered to hold it up. He squints one eye, stuffs an errant lock of hair behind his ear.

Chuuya follows the motion with his eyes.

"Chuuya," Dazai urges, "say something."

“Oh. Go ahead. You do whatever you want.”

Dazai can’t stop the smile that spreads on his lips. Chuuya has no idea what he’s offering. “I want a lot of things.”

“Show me,” Chuuya answers, making it sound like the easiest thing in the world. The words carry through the space between them and brush Dazai’s cheek like a coll breeze, and it makes him shudder, makes him want to bite his lips hard enough to draw blood and claw his arms to ribbons (well, the bandages are there for a reason).

His limbs feel simultaneously stiff and jittery - paralysed by anticipation, but Dazai shakes the unwelcome nerves off with a flick of his wrist - he has to start somewhere, and Chuuya’s still fastened belt seems to be a good place.

Nifty fingers reach, shake ever so slightly but still perform; unbuckle, drag the belt from its loops and drop it, disdainfully, onto the floor.

He unzips Chuuya’s trousers - still not paying attention to his tremulous hands. Not allowing whatever weird physiological thing that’s going on to deter him.

Dazai licks his lips. His throat feels dry, and his eyes sting. He notices with great satisfaction that Chuuya’s breath hitches when he hooks his fingers onto Chuuya’s tented briefs and pulls them down. Slowly.

Chuuya is already more than halfway to fully hard just from a bit of kissing. Something flutters in Dazai’s chest. Pride maybe. To think that he has that much of an effect on Chuuya…

Time slows down as he reaches out his hand, slowly as though moving through water, lets a finger run up the underside of Chuuya’s cock, circles the head.

Chuuya’s breath hitches. Dramatically so - and Dazai wants to interpret it as a compliment.

He presses his head against Chuuya’s thigh, solid and real in a way that forces solidity into Dazai’s unstable being - like diffused mist slowly turning into water droplets on a cloudy morning.

“Good?” he asks, as he leisurely rubs over the slit, spreading the slickness he finds there over his fingers.

“Hngg. Yeah. *Very*... good,” Chuuya replies, words tumbling out of his mouth in a disjointed mess.

Dazai sniggers under his breath. "*Good,*" he echoes, breezy and fresh, complementing it by the errant flick of his hand.

He starts stroking in earnest, setting the leisurely pace; a rough drag that Chuuya very much appreciates if the blooming colour in his cheeks is to be interpreted as evidence.

Chuuya thrusts up into his grip, and Dazai receives the eager action as an extra compliment that goes straight to his head.

He leans forward driven by something that’s beyond explanation. A hunger that’s neither rational nor fair. Something rather wicked. Something which has been locked away deep

down for too long - repressed and violent enough to punch holes through Dazai's core to escape. Something which must be handled with a gentle hand.

A careful little lick to the tip, not to tease as much as to savour the moment.

Wet, sloppy kisses over the shaft of Chuuya's cock follow; he drags his mouth from base to crown and teases the vein that runs along the underside with clever, calculated, cute little flicks of his tongue along the way. Designed to be just on the right side of infuriatingly-not-enough.

He lets his eyes flutter shut as he revels in the delightful symphony of Chuuya's stuttering breaths, tongue digging into the slit mouth parting around the tip and slowly parting around a subdued moan as he sinks down a little further.

The world collapses and reemerges, senses blissfully narrowed-in and alight with focus. Colours dance behind his closed eyelids as a wild and voiceless desire to please swirls like a violent hurricane just beneath the surface of his skin.

Dazai looks up through the cloud of overwhelm that fogs his vision as he keeps working his mouth diligently over Chuuya's cock, in deliberate movements, hollowing his cheeks and bobbing his head in a steady rhythm, working his throat as he swallows.

"Dazai," Chuuya murmurs, the sound seemingly coming from far above, laced in pink silk, soft as it reaches Dazai's ears. Dazai hums, preening at what he assumes - demands - to be not-fully-articulated praise.

His skin prickles.

Fingertips dig into Chuuya's thighs, as he starts sucking urgently on the head, all the while producing the most erotic sounds he knows how to make - round notes played at a frequency that's intended to send jolts of electricity through Chuuya.

He looks up, eyes half-covered by his bangs. Meets Chuuya's gaze. Sucks hard.

Chuuya's breath is forced out of his lungs in a sharp gasp.

Dazai runs his tongue beneath the head of Chuuya's cock before pulling off with a pop and sitting back on his heels. He looks up at Chuuya again. Takes inventory. Sees something inexpressible and barely-there reflected in the way Chuuya looks back. It's soft, intangible.

There are definitely sparks there though, they trickle and fizz like little golden fireworks in a clear blue sky. Dazai is going to commit arson - to fan those little sparks into dancing infernal flames.

He dives back in with every intention to destroy and leave no survivors, sucking Chuuya right in, swallowing him all the way down. He lets his hands roam freely, feeling the soft skin under his fingertips and mapping out every bit of sensitive skin that makes Chuuya sigh or moan. He bobs his head in earnest and hums little notes of pleasure around Chuuya's glorious dick, running his tongue along the underside as he moves up and down. Chuuya's breath is

laboured, and when a small moan escapes his lips, Dazai feels his chest clench hot and tight with satisfaction.

He's convinced his mouth looks pink, and wet, and puffy where it's stretched around Chuuya's cock. It sure feels that way.

Chuuya runs a finger over it and then cups Dazai's cheek. It's disgustingly gentle and sets Dazai's nerves alight.

He runs his tongue over the head, teasing at the slick and then sinks back down.

"Fu-ck," Chuuya pants from somewhere seemingly far above. His hands make their way into Dazai's hair again, tugging lightly, supporting and guiding Dazai's rhythm with gentle determination.

Dazai leans into it. Let's control slip and seep through the cracks as he closes his eyes and moves with the rhythm. Repetitive, soothing, absorbed.

There's definitely not enough oxygen coming to his brain, but he can still think clearly enough to know that he wants to keep going - even when his vision starts to black out.

His ribs hurt, but it doesn't matter, because Chuuya's hands are still in his hair. The touch radiates through him in a way that's colder and more impactful than the hard marble against his knees. A wounding comfort. Something that will leave a mark. Maybe even a scar.

Chuuya's breathing is shallow, and his hips are stuttering slightly, shaking with obvious effort to remain upright.

"I'm- so. Fuck," He pants incoherently, voice touched by something that sounds a lot like a broken chord - stumbling desperation, "so close… and - you. You… get yourself off," Chuuya pants as his nails dig into Dazai's scalp.

He shoves a leg between Dazai's thighs.

The quick movement takes Dazai by surprise, as he one: realises how desperately he needs that friction and instinctively grinds against the leg, and two… nearly chokes on Chuuya's dick.

Chuuya exhales sharply, and Dazai purrs in answer. His mouth sinks all the way down, and his hands press firmly against Chuuya, nails digging crescents into his skin. He squirms against Chuuya legs and breathes heavily through his nose as pleasure ebbs, pools in his stomach, tears him apart from the inside.

So close. It's fever hot, and he can feel the loving arms of pleasure starting to wrap around him, beckoning him to fall into a blissful state of oblivion, as he clings to his last threads of focus.

His tongue slides against the length one last time and then Chuuya's hips twitch as he spills over Dazai's eager tongue, broken moans falling from his lips, fingers flexing in Dazai's hair like a prayer.

Dazai inhales heavily through his nose as he swallows, follows, allows the last threads of control to slip as he ruts against Chuuya's leg and falls over the edge, collapsing against Chuuya --- *a marionette that has had its strings cut.* His body shivers, shudders, aches while pleasure rolls through him, thoughts scattered and thrown to the wind, no longer unified enough to hold onto - merely a mist of dislocated images and phrases swirling around him like fractal patterns.

As empty as always, but blissfully so; the world is a worry-free haze, and it's uncharacteristically, wistfully pleasant.

Dazai rests his head into the crook of Chuuya's hand and sighs. Lets a bit of silence pass. Waits for his heart rate to steady. To return to its old steady drag. Da-dum, da-dum, da-dum.

And with it, thoughts enter - like freight trains crashing together in planned collisions; organised chaos. He struggles to stay still through the unrelenting buzz in his head - the skittish urge to move, to do something, to escape any and all situations that threaten to overwhelm the homeostasis of his easily upset nervous system.

Too much.

But no. The body can't win. He'll ignore the simmering restlessness if it will keep Chuuya there longer.

And miracles do occur it seems. Chuuya stays. Threads his fingers through Dazai's hair. Whispers so quietly, so melodiously. Words like the song of a frail little bird that sings its way through a winter storm.

"Fuck. That was... You're *so* good at that."

… Well, maybe not quite that poetic. But Dazai appreciates it nonetheless.

His fingers twitch involuntarily, the approval sending currents through his nerves. It doesn't sound true at all, but it does sound beautiful; reminds Dazai of a dress that he's not supposed to want to wear - not even supposed to *look* at.

Still...

"Can I tell you something?" he asks. Voice steady, carefully controlled to make the question sound like it's nothing more than a casual inquiry. No big deal.

"Of course. You can tell me anything." Chuuya shots back like Dazai is the easiest target he has ever seen - glancing down with wide pupils.

It's eerie. Dazai wonders if the way his stomach drops should be interpreted as panic or elation. He ignores it.

"... I like… your body," he stammers, words heavy on his tongue - as though they're being pulled from somewhere deep within his chest, half disjointed, wholly embarrassing and not at all what he *wanted* to say. Dazai clears his throat and keeps his expression opaque as he adds,

“it’s a very nice body. Totally my type.” It still doesn't sound right to his own ears - still doesn't come close to conveying all his dumb little heart’s greedy desires.

“Oh,” Chuuya lets out, the sound barely more than a little puff of air. There’s a tiny edge of satisfaction to it, and his smile stretches into a small little unbalanced thing. Then transforms into a crooked self-assured thing. Like he’s secretly very pleased. Like something that tries to reach into the sun. Like he’s having a moment - a moment extended in a timeless vacuum long enough for Dazai to burn it into his memory in technicolour detail.

He doesn’t know what to do with that memory, so he stores it for a later time where he can bring it up in his mind’s eye - examine it to bits and pieces. Tear it apart with logic and analysis until it makes sense.

For now, it’s vulnerable and disorienting in a way that Dazai finds insufferable. He allows himself to be a lot of things, but never ever, blushing, clumsy things. He doesn’t like having so many thoughts that can’t be said out loud. It’s all sorts of irksome and tiring.

He sighs. It's not exactly a fatigued sound (although he does let his mouth go a little slack as though he’s trying to paint the picture of fatigue). He’s not even sure what he’s trying to communicate at this point, and Chuuya looks uncertain too.

There’s a subtle, almost worried, crease starting to form on his forehead but there’s a little too much curiosity to the tilt of his head and a little too much alertness in his gaze to pull off a ‘concerned look’.

“Something’s bothering you?” he says. It doesn’t sound hesitant, but it also doesn’t sound as assertive as things usually do when they come out of his mouth. “Wanna talk about it?”

“No,” Dazai answers automatically as he hoists himself up to his full height, feeling just a little unsteady on his feet, just a little like he’s skating on thin ice and could plunge right through at any moment.

Chuuya smiles, a subtle little lift of his lips that indicates he was anticipating that answer.

Dazai grunts (the kind of half-offended grunt than someone less sophisticated than himself might be able to pull off more convincingly). It should be infuriating to be accused of being predictable in such a relaxed manner, but Dazai feels nothing but a static pull in his joints that he can’t label... it feels a little like reaching out for something he’s unworthy of even wanting. Again.

He can feel long horizontal lines itching under his bandages. He traces one down his forearm, scratches aimlessly, pokes it with a finger where he knows it will hurt most.

“Hey.” Chuuya’s voice cuts through like a knife’s blade, still, somehow gentle, “stop that,” he says, grabbing Dazai’s wrist, running a thumb along the pulse point.

Dazai breathes out. Thinks back to the night prior.

“You didn’t mind, did you?” he asks because everything is unfair and it has somehow become important now. Hours later.

Chuuya’s looks confused, brows drifting together, “Mind what, exactly?”

Dazai shakes his head. Relieved. Chuuya's question is answer enough.

“Never mind.” His voice is quiet, but it reverberates loudly in his own head.

Tender fingertips ghost along the edge of his jaw. “Never mind?” Chuuya asks.

“Never mind. I know you didn’t mind,” Dazai insists, a smile poking at his lips as his limbs fold easily into an untroubled posture, “Chuuya is so nice.”

A baffled expression crosses Chuuya’s face. “I’m confused,” he replies on a low mumble.

“Oh well,” Dazai evades, saying a lot of nothing - yet saying it in a very conclusory tone, purposefully avoiding moving into that uneasy territory where he has to explain things he’d rather not talk about.

He leans against the counter, the hard marble a solid weight against his back, which helps him support the ever so carefree pose he’s desperately trying to enact amidst the unfortunate uncooperativeness of his still slightly trembling legs. “I’m hard to talk to,” he says, not really offering much in the way of an apology, “I realise that.”

“Kind of... but not really.” Chuuya lifts one shoulder in a half-shrug, then adds “I enjoy talking to you.” It’s said with such a sinful softness that it makes Dazai shudder. It fills him full to the bone, and Dazai doesn’t know what to do with that feeling.

He laughs into his sleeve because that’s the only response that feels at least semi-relevant, and for just a second, considers the extent to which he would break all his rules for Chuuya.

Shaking his head to fend off those intrusive thoughts, he waves a hand in the air as though to pull a bit of strength from the air molecules and send them into his crumpling composure. It’s not the time for honesty. They’re on a mission; there’s a painting waiting to get rescued.

Priorities… or something like that.

“Time to play,” is all he says after a moment, is all there is to say, really. He reaches a hand forward, taps his fingers calculatingly against Chuuya’s exposed collarbone. The skin under his fingertips is soft and hot - burns like an amphetamine high. Hot enough to leave blisters.

Chuuya nods and locks eyes with Dazai, determination glowing in shades of blue. “Let’s do this,” he says, confident, but then his face drops into something rather muted.

Dazai squints. “What?”

“It’s just… did you not just jizz your pants?”

“Ah! Yes. Sure did.”

There’s a small half-amused, half-bewildered smile on Chuuya’s lips, “and you’re just going to go out... like *that*?” he asks, eyeing the front of Dazai’s trousers.

“Of course not. Brought a change of clothes for me too. It’s all in the bag,” Dazai responds casually, motioning to the quilted bag on the counter.

Chuuya's eyes narrow. “You planned this, didn’t you?”

『○』

Dazai leaves the bathroom first, peeking out before adjusting the bag that hangs of his shoulder with an air of finality. He slides through the door and strolls casually down the hall, aiming for what he believes to be a shortcut to the exhibition room where The Great Wave is.

He turns left, wanders through a corridor, then turns right - and finds himself by the opening to a room with rather disturbing (but still captivating) modern-art sculptures of yokai lining the hallowed entrance.

He wrinkles his nose and spares a flash glance around. It appears to be the main auction room, decorated with plush cushioned chairs standing in perfectly symmetrical rows on each side of a red velvet carpet, which leads to a platform where Dazai assumes the auction presentation takes place.

There are black and white 60’s style photographs on the walls and fluorescent lamps hanging from the low ceiling, beating down with megawatt blazing brilliance, catching beneath the chunky interior and throwing off strange shadows. It’s mismatched and oppressive, but on the bright side, the room isn’t full to the brim with people.

Uncrowded. Uninteresting. Simple. It would almost seem as though Dazai should be able to pass through uneventfully.

But.

Things rarely work out that way, and Dazai knows it. He’s not the least surprised when he enters the room properly and a too-familiar slimy chill percolates down his spine. It’s an indication that *something* is going on that he needs to pay attention to - something that he’s not going to be able to ignore no matter how much he wants to. He stops in his tracks, sighs and almost slips into that dangerous self-pitying mindstate where he obsesses over the unfairness of life. *Why can’t things just be easy?*

His eyes flick through the scenery an extra time, taking in the details that hide in the cracks in walls, in the smudges on the carpet and the slant of the few other auction-goers' smiles.

His awareness finally lands on the big offender; there’s a somewhat wonky-looking and style-clashing presentation table on the podium and on top of it are a few items in glass display cases. From afar they all look like antique European-style goblets, but one of them is not like the others - he can feel a distinct pull of the silver chalice in the middle of the display.

There’s something about it... the way his blood turns a little colder than it’s usual below-zero temperature, the way it’s like a lightbulb flickers in his brain and moths flap their wings in his ribcage. Something nagging.

Something that makes *No Longer Human* wind tight around him like prickly vines.

Interest piqued, Dazai moves a little closer, sliding over the hardwood floor as soundlessly as possible, the very picture of casual-bystander-curiosity as he nears the table.

The silver chalice is indeed the odd one out in the display. It’s decidedly not of European-catholic origin as the other vessels appear to be.

It’s small and doesn’t look quite as archaic as the others. Rather, it looks like a modern-day replica of some melodramatic person’s vision of what antiquities are supposed to look like.

Still, it’s a very distinct kind of beautiful - its aura leaving the impression of something utterly annihilating. How very seductive.

The light radiating down on the podium from above reflects in the glass display case, which the chalice is in. It makes it harder to study the details, and easier to catch one’s own reflection in the polished glass (which, Dazai sort of wants to smudge it with his fingerprints).

He sighs as he tilts slightly to the side and bends forward, blocking out some of the reflective light to study the artefact a little closer.

It’s well kept without a single sign of use or oxidation. It’s engraved with familiar kanji symbols combined with roman letters and some very strange ornamentation, which Dazai has never come across before. Something that vaguely resembles veins and arteries stretching around the rim and bowl; drops of what he supposes to be blood dripping down the stem. Rather morbid.

Despite the uneasiness, the thing inspires in him, he can’t help but feel a little bit of affection for its exaggerated gothic aesthetics.

Dazai can’t know about the existence of that thing casually. He’s not going to be able to leave without it.

He smiles softly to himself. No, of course, things can’t just be easy.

He quickly glances around, although he doesn’t really need to. He already knows that the few other guests in the room are to busy fanning themselves, sipping champagne and laughing politely at each other's tactfully mild jokes to notice him.

And the security guard who stands by the door, looking like someone who has never found anything funny in his entire life - well, Dazai can accept that challenge - if he can’t sneak out a little souvenir under that big guy’s nose, then he’s truly slipping.

The problem is timing - the painting is first priority, and the particular role-play scenario he has set up in that regard does not include stolen goods - which means that the mysterious

chalice will have to wait.

He'll have to somehow sneak it out on his way out of the gallery. It's going to be a bit more of a hassle as he expects to be escorted out by security when that time comes, but nothing he can't pull off with a few diversions and a nifty bit of sleight of hand.

Dazai stretches slightly, the tediousness of constantly having to plan and just... *know* everything is something he's miserably used to, but the evening has already thrown a lot of physical activity his way, and he's feeling just a little low on energy.

Of course, he doesn't regret anything. The ache in his jaw and his bruised knees serve as a wonderfully visceral reminder of things he'd gladly carry around with him for the rest of his life - even if they hurt.

He lets out a stiff little jawn. Stiffer than his usual jawns anyway - he has to stay in character, and it's just like rich snobs like Shuji to be bored by high-dopamine-experience events like illegal auctions (but only showing it in the most repressed passive-aggressive little ways).

He turns to leave the room. *Swosh-swosh* of his sleeves as he swings his arms, strolling along like he doesn't have a single care in the world, and *clack-clack* of his food steps against the floor. Dazai's shoes are as squeaky clean as the glossy smile that adorns his lips, but he entertains himself by imagining that he leaves little dirty scuffs with each step.

It's all good. Dirty fantasies are integral to a sharp intellect.

Just as he's about to pass through to the connecting room and get on with the mission, the-sense-of-being-stared-at grabs hold of his neck and trickles down his spine like ink in water.

How curious.

He slowly turns his head, casts a glance over his shoulder, searches out the person who dares make such unashamed eye-contact with his back.

It's a young man with very delicate features - so innocent looking it's almost creepy. His hair is shiny. It elegantly frames his face in a heart shape. On top of his head is a rather unfashionable Russian style hat - but Dazai supposes that as an eccentric fashion statement it could work.

But then there's the suit he's wearing. It's just a little too much - just a few too many unnecessary gold details sewn into the white silk fabric.

Strange how some people decorate their distress.

Yes, there's definitely something about him. Something that just screams emotional dissonance - and it's not just that he has vulnerable grandiosity stored in the slant of his posture, arrogance lazed into his smile and steel in his eyes.

There's something else. The man sets off all the animal instincts Dazai has honed over the years. Probably an ability user.

Dazai blinks a single time, and maybe that is a mistake because the man's already arrogant smile turns into a proper smirk - one that makes Dazai's insides curl in on themselves.

Whoever that man is, he's making Dazai want to throw up - something Dazai, of course, doesn't allow himself to dwell on because he's… a charming person who lives a charming life (or something like that). He swallows down his urge to grimace and instead offers a little flirtatious wink, which turns to an eye roll as soon as the creepy-but-somehow-still-attractive man looks away.

The man turns to his companion - a tall, pale, serious-looking fellow - and whispers something into his ear.

Dazai sighs, and taps his fingers against his thigh in imitation of the dreadful piano music which he, unfortunately, still registers in the background (although he's purposefully trying to block it out). He's suddenly reminded that Chuuya still hasn't played the piano for him and that's unacceptable. Dazai get's the immediate impulse to call off the operation and drag Chuuya back to the hotel - *refuse* to do anything else before Chuuya has played a perfect rendition of Clair de Lune for him.

He blinks and wills himself back to the present moment, zeroing in on the two men across the room, again. There's a distant, flitting twinge in his stomach, and if he believed in that kind of thing, he would call it his intuition telling him that things don't bode well.

Well, it's not just intuition. Logic and deduction say that the two mysterious men are here for the chalice: It's obvious from the way they look at it and whisper between themselves. Sure, they're mighty subtle - they don't even shoot worried glances towards the security guys, but it's a kind of casualness that's so practised and one that Dazai easily recognizes as fake.

Dazai sighs softly. Of course, something as devious as *that* chalice-thing would be sought after.

Still, that's going to be a problem for later. Dazai has business to attend to. *Priorities*.

He waves pleasantly at the man in the hideous hat (Afterall, he's pretty sure they'll be seeing more of each other) and then turns on his heel, swaddling out of the auction room.

He enters the main exhibition room with that distinct drunken drag to his steps, and a dopey smile on his lips. The "probably drank too much and is high on god knows what" act comes effortlessly to him. It's a very familiar and well-fitting suit, which he wears with practised ease.

His attention wanders around quickly. The chandeliers' blinding luminosity still too bright to be anywhere near tolerable, acrid and gross to the point it stings, but he ignores it, his eyes intently seeking, searching, observing.

There are two security people on duty. The big one from earlier plus a newcomer. A tall woman with a short sharp haircut and a face that's a little too serious to be friendly but

otherwise very pleasant. Her eyes are already on Dazai, a suspicious look that almost manages to hide her amusement completely.

Good. She finds the supposed drunkenness comical. He intends to give her an epic show.

Chuuya is already there. Standing across the room with his arms folded over his chest in his best impersonation of a severe security person. It's convincing enough, and the tight uniform looks good enough on him that Dazai doesn't miss the blue suit and the diamond choker too much. (those uniform-trousers are very tight and hug his thighs just right).

He catches Chuuya's eyes, and just the tiny dilation of his pupils which is barely perceptible across the distance lets Dazai know that Chuuya is ready. For just a moment it's as though time stands still, an implosion in a vacuum where neither sound nor gravity matters - only the extended eye contact exists. Understanding echoes between them like silent shockwaves.

The game is on.

Dazai takes mental inventory. Checks. All the pieces are in place, the blueprints of the plan laid out as a 3D image in his mind. He navigates it like a chessboard, anticipating the move of each player.

The useless pawns, the two security guards. The Great Wave in front of him - only a few feet away. Chuuya.

The trajectory is clear.

"Oh my my. Look at that gorgeous swimming pool〜" he exclaims, as he points to The Great Wave. He wills glistening sparkles to appear in his eyes and claps his hands together with enough impact to make an obnoxiously loud smacking sound.

His hands hurt, but it doesn't matter. All eyes are on him, the entire room's attention zeroed in on this drunk disaster his trying to imitate - holding its breath. Waiting for his next move.

A high pitched voice cuts through the thick silence of anticipation. Jarring... Dazai might even call it shrill.

"Excuse me, sir," it hollers from somewhere on Dazai's left. It's the tall, alert looking security guard, and she's moving closer like an arrow shooting through the stagnant quicksand moment - Dazai will have to be even quicker, then.

Her boots click against the floor, a stunted echo, that resounds in harmony with her voice, "you're a little to close t-"

"Oh, it isn't a swimming pool," Dazai sings "It's a sea! I would like to jump into it and let it swallow my broken, yearning soul whole."

One quick move before she gets to him. He leaps forward and grabs the painting's frame.

An alarm goes off. It's loud. Paralyzingly so. It sounds the way Dazai imagines corruption feels. He'll have to ask Chuuya about that later.

He’s senses are overwhelmed, overstimulated, overthrown to the point that things blend together in a semi-meaningless swamp of sensation - but he still manages to sustain awareness where it matters, manages to focus on the tight grip of his knuckles. He feels then tightening around the painting, feels the tips of his fingers making contact with paint on wood.

“You. Stop right there,” The shrill voice blasts through the ear-splitting noise of the alarm.

Dazai puffs. What a strange thing to say. He isn’t going anywhere.

The alarm clings of with a last piercing *WEEEE-oooOOO-* and the world returns to a less upsetting mess. Dazai opens his eyes. Well, he’s pretty sure they've been open all along. But now he’s actually able to connect the input he’s receiving from his eyes with the signals from the rest of his body.

He blinks a single time. Takes stock.

In front of him is the security guard who yelled at him earlier, pointing a gun at him. On his right is Chuuya, not holding a gun, but doing a very decent impersonation of a chill and interfere-as-little-as-possible-policy security guard. A few feet away is the big loaf of a lazy guard. He’s slowly trailing towards the scene, gun still in its holster and face still very flat and indifferent. Dazai sort of admires his stoicism.

Dazai giggles. “This is *my* sparkly sea, and I’m not giving it back,” he trills, clutching the painting tighter to his chest.

The tall one steps closer. She points her gun a little more aggressively and reaches out her free hand.

“Give back the painting. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Nope〜 it’s mine, and you can’t have it.”

Chuuya clears his throat. “With all due respect... This guy is clearly unstable, I think he just needs to sit down, maybe have a glass of water and sleep of… whatever he’s on.”

The tall security guard looks torn between keeping her eyes on Dazai and sending Chuuya a suspicious glare.

In the end, she keeps her gun pointed at Dazai and redirects her gaze to Chuuya. “Who the fuck are you? I haven’t seen you before.”

“I’ve been here all night. I’m personal security for one of the organizers. Just happened to follow around this guy because he seemed… a bit... wobbly,”

“Huh?”

“He’s clearly under the influence and has kleptomaniac tendencies - I saw him trying to steal a patrons bracelet right of her wrist. Quite tragic how some of these rich bastards descent into the most ironic types of insanity, isn't it?”

The woman nods sagely, arms still stretched and gun still pointing directly at Dazai. “You’re right, but-”

“I WOULD DROWN IN THIS BEAUTIFUL OCEAN,” Dazai roars, suffocating any objection that might be on her tongue, “BUT I CAN'T DO IT ALONE. WON'T YOU JOIN ME IN A LOVER'S SUICIDE?”

“OI. shut up you little rich brat - and hand back the painting.”

“*NO.* ” Dazai asserts in his best impersonation of a petulant child. He's completely unashamed of the ease with which he embodies the role.

The big security guy cuts in. “You,” he says sounding magnificently tired of the situation, pointing at Chuuya, “can you take it from him while I-”

"I don't know... I feel like he's going to cause a scene.” Chuuya blinks. Scratches his neck. “I really think we should try to handle this discreetly. Let's just take him to the security room - He just needs to sleep it off. Have him sit down and I’m sure he’ll pass out within minutes, then we can take the painting.”

Both security guards squint at Chuuya, clearly trying to gauge his status and the appropriateness of someone of his age refusing orders and making alternate suggestions.

Dazai needs to help speed the decisionmaking process up. “MUSHROOMS ARE THE CHILDREN OF TREES.”

“Okay, you’re right, junior officer,” The tall woman says, not even lowering her gun slightly, “This disaster-kid is causing too much chaos.”

Dazai sticks out his tongue, and she looks like she wants to roll her eyes to the ceiling, but she keeps them pointed with razor-sharp focus on Dazai. “Alright prima donna, if you’ll just follow us.”

“Where are we going?" Dazai asks curious, drunken tilt to his voice, "are there mushrooms?”

“Sure.”

Dazai smiles bright and wonky as he clutches the painting to his chest like a child clinging to their favourite toy. “I’ll go because you’re so nice, but the swimming pool is still mine〜”

“Whatever.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Dazai catches Chhuya shooting him a sly look. Dazai returns it with a conspiratorial wink.

Everything is going to plan.

Chapter End Notes

Tu peux m'aider à me déshabiller… mais d'abrod… puis-je vous embrasser? = You can help me undress... but first.. can I kiss you?

Thanks for reading. This was a long one. You deserve a gold medal for making it through 🌟

Let me know if you liked it 🥺

Come hang out with me on twitter.

9. Sleeping beauty

Chapter Summary

Just Chuuya and Dazai having a kink negotiation conversation in front of two strangers while being on an undercover mission… multitasking legends.

Plot-relevant things happen too.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the kudos, kind words and for still being here, even though I'm a slow updater. I'm overwhelmed with gratitude, you are all so kind and wonderful.

A little note

So since I take SOOOO long to update (I'm sorry), some of you may have forgotten The Plan. So, I'm just going to summarise real quick to avoid confusion: There's a plastic bag in Dazai's fancy Chanel bag (I know I don't actually refer to it as a Chanel bag in the story, but it's totally Chanel). Chuuya's supposed to take the bag so he can hide the painting in it and escape through the back exit without anyone noticing. Also, Dazai runs that little side operation where he plans to steal the very mysterious chalice.

Okay, I think that's all. I'm probably over-explaining again.

Happy reading. I poured so much love and tears and time into this, so I hope you enjoy it. Thank you so much for reading <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The quiet hum of the ventilation is like the distant elongated note of a detuned organ. It's ominous, and it blends rather unmusically with their echoing steps as they move down the long, narrow hallway (which Dazai can only assume leads to a secret dungeon or something of that sort).

"*Ouch*." He glares at the tall security guard who is - very ungently - leading him along, "You're being very rough with me, officer. Don't you realise I'm a delicate little flower."

The tall just guard squeezes his forearm harder. "Shut up."

Dazai pouts at her, but she seems all but immune to charm. The hard grip doesn't loosen one bit.

"Do you even know who I am? Who my dad is?" he asks with a hint of a rich-kid whine to his performance of righteous indignation.

His question is met by an exaggerated eye roll, which of course is nothing more than an incentive for him to continue his supreme acting. "So my dad. He's kind of important -- and so am I by, uh… by extension," he stammers, a pitch-perfect rendition of intoxicated logic. "And therefore, I can do whatever I want because I'm... because I said so, and if I want to drown myself in-"

"*Please* shut up."

"... Okay," Dazai acquiesces, "but only because you said please."

They come to a full-stop before a narrow, deep-set door.

The beefy security guy opens the door with a large, rusty prison-like key and pushes it open - it squeaks dramatically, its hinges crying out for oil in a way that makes Dazai wince in discomfort. Or sympathy. Or something along those lines. He's not sure exactly.

Languidly, the guard jostles the key back in his pocket and wanders into the room with Chuuya trailing right behind him, hands casually resting in his pockets but his shoulders locked in a tense watchfulness.

Dazai and the tall security guard who is holding him in a rather militaristic vice grip are last in line.

"Here we go." She urges Dazai into the room with a forceful push and a domineering ring hiding just beneath the shrill surface of her voice. "Now, sit," she commands as though talking to a dog.

She points to a wonky chair that stands right in the middle of the small room with an overhead spotlight beating straight down on it - bathing it in a dusty fluorescent hue that makes it looks like some angst-aesthetics interrogation prop.

Delightful.

Still, it's an all-round uncomfortable and unstable looking chair: thin metal legs, uncushioned seat and wooden back frame. Dazai resents the instinctual sense of kinship the thing inspires in him.

He blinks at it. Shifts his weight from foot to foot, but doesn't move. Wins a little time. Pulls his gaze sideways to study the room in further detail.

A long mahogany desk takes up most of the room-space. It's littered with disorganised piles of paper, a sleek stationary computer (screensaver, a swirly pink and purple galaxy) and a Maneki-neko used as a paperweight.

There's a little drinks table in the corner but, very anticlimactically, it offers no booze. Instead of blessed alcohol, there's a tall fancy-looking crystal carafe filled with a clear liquid, which Dazai recognises as water (as a connoisseur, he has no trouble distinguishing the visual difference between vodka and water). Next to it are stacked a number of plastic cups. It's… an astoundingly dissonant decorative arrangement.

Dazai is interrupted from his data gathering quest when the security guard taps at his shoulder and clears her throat. "Please, take a seat," she repeats with a vigorous gesture towards the wobbly-looking chair.

"But of course," Dazai responds on a high note, smiling from ear to ear, "anything for you."

He takes a few light steps toward the chair and drops down into it without complaint. The thing screeches in distress, and Dazai winces internally but covers up his discomposure by setting his limbs into a casual posture.

He hugs the painting to his chest and bounces his legs to an offbeat rhythm. "I'm sitting!" he declares, loud and bright.

The security guard heaves a sigh that sounds like exasperation sprinkled with a bit of something else. "Yes, I can see that."

She looks unimpressed. Impressively so; eyes that distinct kind of blank which is obviously forced just for the sake of looking grumpy, mouth set in a tight line that lifts into a mocking grimace.

If not for the triumphant flip of her wrist when she takes a few hurried steps backwards and slams the door shut, Dazai could almost fall for her act - as it is he has no doubt she's anything but secretly very pleased by the whole farce.

Most people long for a little bit of drama, Dazai supposes.

Funny that.

He blinks innocently at her, not exactly to call her out, but with enough coyness to make anyone uncomfortable. She responds by diverting her gaze. And then - maybe for the sake of doing something - she paces towards the drinks table and pours herself some water with an unsteady hand.

The liquid overflows; spills from the plastic cup and onto the table that gather like shiny, wet pearls.

It's a mess. She doesn't seem to care.

Dazai cringes at the display, Kouyou's internalised ethics causing him to feel like his delicate sensibilities should be offended by such brazen disregard for etiquette.

The security guard takes a big gulp of the water and lets out a gratified blow of air through her mouth as she lowers the cup again.

“What a night,” she comments in a monotone - an arbitrary statement that Dazai easily reads as excitement.

“You’re welcome,” he quips back and graces her with the courtesy of a smile that’s as sincere as the circumstances allow (which isn’t very sincere, but at least his intentions are good).

He sits back in his chair, and once again, it creaks and quacks dramatically with the motion - sings in discordant tones about how it's about to break. Dazai very determinedly tunes out the traitorous part of his cursed brain, which concludes that all the screeching is because he’s too heavy. That is not a relevant thought.

“Where am I?” he asks, distracting himself with the more pressing task of keeping up appearances, “Is this the afterlife I’ve been dreaming of?”

“No.” The beefy security guy’s eyes are heavy and don’t quite meet Dazai’s as he answers, “this is where you get to sleep it off.” It’s said with the jealous longing of someone who hasn’t slept properly in a long time.

“Ah-a,” Dazai sing-songs, crossing his legs but keeping up the bouncing movement (for the sake of annoying everyone around him), “the land of sleeping beauties.”

The guard nods halfheartedly, “I guess it is.” He slips his hands into his pockets and sighs heavily. The air propels out of his mouth, and a faint smell of minty mouthwash hits Dazai’s nostrils.

It isn’t massively unpleasant, but it *is* way-too-much. He suppresses the immediate impulse to wrinkle his nose and turn his head - smiles dazedly instead. “Soooo… if I fall asleep, does that make me a princess?” he inquires, disentangling one arm from the painting to lift a hand and place a finger upon his lips - probably looking for all the world like he's deep in thought and wants to contain the wondrous musings in his head a little longer before they spill from his mouth.

He's not actually that ruminative about it: he kind of, sort of already knows exactly how he feels about being compared to a princess.

No one needs to know that, though.

Chuuya puffs out a soft laugh from his spot near the door. “Yup, I’m pretty sure that the logical conclusion to all of this is that you’re a princess in need of some beauty sleep.” It’s said in a playful tone - could easily pass as a joke with no substance.

Still… Dazai turns in his seat; intuitively seeks out the recognition he craves more than he cares to admit. And maybe. Just maybe, Chuuya is a safe person to ask for such a thing…

Dazai tilts his head to the side. “I am a princess?” he asks - a softly spoken inquiry that hopefully passes as curious rather than pleading.

Chuuya’s face brightens, surprise and delight lighting up the dim room. “You *are*,” he says with oh-so-much conviction. Leaving no room for objection.

Dazai notices a distant swirly sensation dancing through his core. It spreads. Rushes to his head. Makes him feel just a little off-balance as the world flips around and he feels his heart drop to the bottom of the infinite universe, pulled down by the weight of lightheadedness.

It's fine. Nothing he can't hide like a pro.

"Hmmm," he slurs around a jawn that's only mildly over-dramatized, "how delightful… always wanted to be a princess."

Chuuya steps closer, there's a spring in his step and his artfully tousled hair waves as he motions towards Dazai. "You," he says meaningfully, as though there could be any doubt as to who he's addressing.

Dazai tilts his head, in question. "Me?"

"You are kind of cute when you're not being a massive pain in the ass." "Okay, that's enough, junior officer. No more flirting," comes the tall guard's voice, carrying the sound of well-rounded work-ethics along with its shrillness. "He may be too messed-up to remember any of it tomorrow, but it's still inappropriate." She takes a resolute sip of her water while keeping eyes firmly looked on Chuuya.

And Chuuya has the most wonderfully interesting reaction. He averts his gaze; looks down as he taps the tip of his shoe against the floor and grumbles something that sounds a lot like a muffled version of "he started it." His cheeks are painted with a soft pink highlight.

Adorable.

Dazai feels laugher sparkling in his throat, and he sees no need to suppress it. Lets it spill out although it both feels and sounds shaky.

Chuuya's head snaps up, eyes brighter than a dying star when they hone in on Dazai. A smile passes across his face. It lingers there like an unspoken promise.

And Dazai shamelessly hordes the reassurance. Stuffs it in his pocket to keep it as a lucky charm. He doesn't have to *believe* in that sort of thing to find it comforting.

He jawns again, stretches his arms over his head and nearly drops the painting out of his lap as he does so.

"Whoopsie," he says and sinks in on the painting again, wraps his arms around it, hugs it tightly.

He reclines in the chair and closes his eyes. Shifts a bit. Shifts again.

The chair truly is nowhere near comfortable, and Dazai wonders if it's even believable that Shuji - regardless of his supposed level of messed up on more or less legal substances - would be able to fall asleep on that kind of painfully unaccommodating surface.

He steadies his breathing. Exhales softly through his slightly parted mouth as his posture steadily sinks further into a sleepy slump of a pose. (A pose, which hopefully resembles the

perfect picture of a sleeping… well, maybe not a sleeping beauty - that might be too much to hope for. A sleeping *something*.)

Mellow light beats down from above. It dances behind his eyelids as a beautiful, abstract reminder of all the things he's not allowed to look at while pretending to be snoozing.

Chuuya's voice blends in with the reverie: "So," he says, voice low, and muddled - absorbed like a sponge by the thick walls and the tasteless decor. "I'll just search his bag and make sure that it isn't full of stolen shi-*stuff*."

"Sure," comes the answer, a deep disinterested rumble.

A moment of silence and then comes the unmistakable-signature sound of rattling bag-chains followed by a clumsy --*flop*-- as the fluffy quilted bag hits the surface of hardwood.

There's a tiny but sharp click vibrating through the room; signalling the bag's little click-lock coming undone.

A bit of rummaging. Scrambling. Scratching.

Dazai hears the distinct sound of a plastic bag sliding into a pocket. It's subtle but there.

And no one is commenting on it, so it appears Chuuya is smoothly getting away with a bit of righteous-thievery.

Perfect. Dazai's shrivelled little thing of a heart trembles with confetti-shaped delight.

There are a few more 'ruffling things around' noises, and then Chuuya's voice breaks the itchy, dust-heavy almost-silence. "Okay, it looks fine. No stolen goods in his bag. Just a phone, a wallet... and a change of clothes. Rich people are so weird."

Footsteps pat across the floor and Dazai recognises the cadence of Chuuya's steps easily; the rising crescendo as the sound moves closer and then comes to an abrupt stop.

The heat that always seems to surround Chuuya like an aura whiffs around Dazai's senses.

And when Chuuya speaks again, he's close enough that Dazai can feel the air bending around his words. "Should be pretty easy to take the painting from the sleeping beauty now, right?"

The answer comes with the squidge of a plastic cup being clutched by a small-but-strong hand. A moment of pensive silence, and then: "Yeah. He's probably only half-asleep but let's give it a go."

Dazai still clings to the painting, but he feels a slight shift in its gravity as Chuuya's presence crowds close against him.

Chuuya's fingers brush his own as they bend around the painting. "I'll hold the painting's frame, and you can unwrap his arms, senior officer?" Chuuya questions, like he's waiting for an answer. Like he hasn't already made the decision. Like he isn't already *doing it* - ensuring

that he’s the one who gets to hold the painting once it’s wrestled from Dazai’s grip; the one who gets to take care of carrying it back to its exhibition spot.

Clever detective.

Dazai dips his head in Chuuya’s direction and flutters his lashes like he's absorbed in sweet dreams.

Thin, long, cold fingers that are decidedly *not* Chuuya’s brush Dazai’s forearm. It’s a light touch, but it somehow feels heavy. And cold. Even through layers of clothes and bandages.

The hand grabs hold of his wrist and slowly, carefully unravels his arms.

Dazai doesn’t resist, unfolds easily, keeps his muscle tone passive and unresponsive as he’s directed by those cold hands.

The painting's grounding weight lifts from his lap, and he instantly misses the comfort of a weight pressing down on his thighs (he’s willing to make those kinds of sacrifices to move the plan along though).

“Got it,” Chuuya whispers and the quiet but victorious melody seems aimed directly at Dazai. It's an understated celebration, with a simple colour-code. Very elegant.

Dazai wants to smile, but sleeping beauties don’t smile at secret plans going splendidly least they want to give away their cover.

He keeps his features neutral and placid, sinks into an awkward position with his hands stretched by his side as he tries not to dwell on how he misses having something to wind them around.

He observes the familiar-sounding shuffle of clothes, the fabric of Chuuya’s uniform rubbing against the painting's wooden frame. Chuuya is already moving towards the door it seems. “Should I take the painting back to the exhibition room immediately? I’m sure the air pressure in here isn't optimal for its preservation.”

“Yes, excellent point,” the security guard's distinct piercing voice praises, “but there have probably been too many fingerprints smeared all over it... we need to alert a curator. I'm sure it needs some kind of professional examination.”

There's a beat of heavy silence, broken by a sharp inhale and then Chuuya’s voice chimes clearly through the stillness. “Let me take care of it so you can get back on duty.”

“This is my-”

“Yes, but as I said earlier, I was hired directly by one of the organisers. Mishima-san expects me to report directly to him. I’ll let him know about the situation. He’ll decide what needs to happen to the painting.”

Another hush settles over the room; so dense that even the distant drone of ventilation, which plays in the background, seems to shrink.

…

“Right... Of course," the guard picks up the halted conversation with renewed momentum, "didn’t realise you were familiar with Mishima-san.”

“I usually serve as his personal security, actually,” Chuuya says, and it sounds so confident that it’s hard to consider his words to be anything but true.

Dazai lets out a soft exhale. He's very pleased with Chuuya’s unexpected improvisation skills; contemplates them with a sense of justifiable pride.

And he remains still as a statue, but in spirit, he's giving Chuuya well-deserved head pats.

A gusty whirl of air that smells a little like citrus and cheap tobacco (and a lot like Chuuya) hits Dazai’s face, and then a --*woosh*-- of hasty steps move across the floor. Away from Dazai.

The door creaks open and then shuts with a subdued tick.

An unusual and very unwanted surge of electric energy swirls through Dazai's head and down his spine as he listens to the clatter of Chuuya’s shoes getting fainter and fainter until the sound fades completely into the ether. It's not a feeling he can put a name to, but it does seem to evoke a certain sense of... foreboding.

It’s disturbing, frankly, how much Chuuya’s presence leaves behind: a slight shift in temperature, an oppressive stillness, a faded brightness - a loss of light that Dazai mourns from behind closed lids.

And it all adds up; the room at large seems infinitely more boring when it’s not juxtaposed against Chuuya’s gentle-chaotic presence.

How very dull, for Dazai to be left behind. He’s starting to resent his own plan.

He lets out another muted half-snore, blowing out the air like it’s the smoke of a cigarette.

His head feels like it’s made of sand, a deadweight where it’s slumped against his shoulder. The side of his mouth presses against the soft thick silk of his suit. It’s wildly unpleasant, and if he’s not careful, there’s a real possibility that the open-mouthed breathing combined with the odd angle might result in drooling. Which, granted, would be a candied cherry on top to the sleeping-act he’s trying to pull off but also... kind of slobbish. And slobbish just seems a few too many levels beneath ‘princess’.

So he slowly closes his mouth on an exhale, shifts a bit and finally melts into a position that makes it somewhat easier to ignore the building crick in his neck.

He breathes in heavily again, absorbs the quaintness of the quiet room as he actively forces his mind to remain blank and neutral.

Boring. Painfully boring.

And boredom is an achingly familiar shape. It fits into his body like a second skeleton - all be it unwelcomingly so.

It also makes violence simmer under his skin, and his fingers itch to tear something apart.

He checks the internal clock that's always ticking away in his latent consciousness. A constant timekeeper, which serves him with a precision equivalent to the laws of nature.

It's time to cut the charade short. No need to sit around and be listless about nothing… or everything. Whatever.

With a dainty little startle worthy of a baby dear and a gulp of air, he jolts up and flutters his eyes open.

Two sets of eyes immediately focus on him.

Water is poured from the elegant carafe into a plastic cup. The tall security guard takes the cup and flows in a single fluid motion across the floor - movements precise rather than elegant.

She towers over Dazai like a modern skyscraper, all tall and sleek and mildly intimidating. Then her head tips to the side and her eyes soften as she pushes the plastic cup into Dazai's hand. It's quite a bit of attentive concern she's showing all of a sudden, and Dazai basks in the free attention.

"Thank you, I love mango juice," he beams as he squashes the soft plastic and lifts the cup to his lips in an erratic movement befitting of his feigned half-sober state. The water sloshes out the sides and spills on his white shirt.

The guard peers at the big wet splotch of water. "Right…" There's a rather amused drop to her voice - like she's holding back from splitting into a laugh. "that's water, though."

"I see," Dazai says, looking down on himself and the mess he oh-so-purposefully made. The wetness seeps through his bandages and hugs his ribs, making him consider if he's possibly taking his excellent acting too far - he sort of resents his own plan-making and strategy once again.

Oh well. Ces't la vie.

"How disappointing," he mumbles into his half-empty, cup of water.

The guard hums. "Do you think you're fit to leave? You don't seem in-"

"It'll be fine. I'll call my fiance. He's somewhere around here, and he's soooo good at taking care of me."

She gives him a very unsubtle once-over, judgement manifest in her gaze. "Clearly not."

"Wha- He is. I'm sure he's super worried," Dazai responds, a bit of a whine bleeding into his objection, "and my head is perfectly clear."

She squints at Dazai as though trying to x-ray the truthfulness of his statement.

Dazai is entertained by her attempt to try such a thing, but it is, of course, futile - the truth, as always, is whatever Dazai wants it to be. “Let me give him a call and have him meet me outside,” Dazai says as he lowers his head just right and looks at her with dewy eyes.

The reluctance slides away from the set angle of her jaw. “Okay… I guess you do seem a little more coherent,” she acknowledges with a slow nod of her head, “give him a call.”

Dazai smiles appreciatively and fishes his phone out of his pocket.

He pauses. Ponders his options. And while he easily comes to the logical conclusion that he should call Chuuya, there’s also little doubt that it would be infinitely more entertaining to call someone less versed in the current plan.

He punches in the familiar number and waits...

Akutagawa’s ever-eager voice cuts off the dial tone halfway through the first ring. “*Dazai-san.*”

“Darling!”

“... Dazai-san?” Akutagawa's tone carries a strong hint of confusion, but it’s still sprinkled with his trademark intensity.

“Yes, yes. I’m very sorry, my love,” Dazai sings into the speaker, loud and high-pitched enough to be painfully distorted on the receiving end of the call. “I won’t run off like that again. Can you meet me outside the gallery? I want to go home.”

A roaring silence, and then: “I… I’m sorry, Dazai-san. I’m not familiar with this code language you’re using. I’ll report to the boss and let him know that y-”

“No-no, that won’t be necessary. You can punish me all you want when we get home, though. I *have* been very naughty.”

There’s some incoherent sputtering on the other end of the line. Dazai takes a moment to appreciate it before he interrupts with a cheery, “That’s great. See you in a sec. J'taime. Byeeee!"

He quickly hangs up before Aktugawa has a meltdown. (He’s a nice executive who doesn’t torment his subordinates more than what is strictly necessary after all).

『○』

Big Guy escorts Dazai through the gallery.

He doesn’t seem particularly thrilled by the task, but he doesn’t seem downright displeased either, so Dazai makes the executive decision to not take it personally. When it comes to strangers, few things are personal, anyway.

He drags his feet along the floor as they walk side by side down the corridor, heading straight for the reception foyer. The grip on his shoulder is relatively loose, only a subtle reminder that he's being guided.

It's fairly icky. Dazai would have taken brute force over the thick fingers that lightly knead the meat of his shoulder, but he smiles agreeably nonetheless. Blocks out irrelevant tightness and focuses his attention on the pros of the slimy but light grip - it should be easy enough to make a run for it once they reach the auction room - to pull off a fast and efficient steal-the-cursed-chalice operation before leaving the gallery to (hopefully) never return again.

The plan is simple. Run around like a feral hamster for a bit, create a suitable diversion - knocking over the glass display cases should do the trick. Once the flawlessly glossy medley of patrons, security and dressed-up yakuza members are suitably distracted, he should be able to whisk away the chalice into his bag without anyone noticing.

Except. Dazai considers it unlikely that it's going to go down like that.

Unless he has severely underestimated Mr Creepy from earlier, or misread his intentions - both unlikely scenarios - the man will already have stolen the chalice.

Dazai bites his lips and lets the pain sink in - an unpleasant but necessary reminder to stay grounded. *Plan ahead but don't get lost in speculation.* A thought that feels like slipping on ice and sounds a lot like Mori-san's voice.

He blinks the distractions away. Refocuses.

They approach the auction room. Dazai shoots the big guy beside him a look, then yawns exaggeratedly and stretches his arms over his head as he slows down his pace significantly. The guard adjusts on instinct - as the fatigued and detached types so often do - tired tendencies susceptible to suggestion, going along with Dazai's whims.

Pace slowed and a little extra time won, Dazai shoots long looks toward the auction room as they pass by. He's ready to bash if necessary - but as expected - the chalice isn't there. Not in the glass case and not anywhere else to be seen.

A twang of something rather acidic shoots though Dazai's core. He's not surprised in the least, but apparently, that doesn't hold his body back from feeling bitter.

Well, Dazai reckons it's a fair reaction on his body's part - It *is* a very irksome situation: wrestling the thing out of Creepy Man's pale hands is going to be a chore.

He sighs and speeds up his steps as he steers the way towards the main entrance (which also happens to be the exit. Dazai appreciates the architectural poetry in that a lot).

He sways along without guidance from the hand around his shoulder, pulls the guard along the same way he would lead a waltz - that is, with little concern for his dancing partner.

Outside the gallery, the night is bright with artificial light and the reflective gleam of a bunch of rich people's jewellery.

It’s a lot. Dazai breathes in, but the air is heavy. The sharp scent of the city burns his lungs and mingles unpleasantly with the buzz of fancy car engines and socialite chatter that thrusts against his sensitive ears.

It all hits like a wave of nausea.

Unpleasant, yes, but if Dazai allows himself to pay attention to it, there’s always a little bit of nausea pressing against his ribs. It’s nothing out of the ordinary, and it’s nothing he can’t repress.

He quickly scans the place... no Chuuya. That's okay - he must be waiting around for Dazai by the back exit.

Dazai will just have to find someone else who can pose as stand-in adoring fiance.

He looks over the scenery again, radar attuned to easy prey. He knows Chuuya doesn’t like ‘manipulative tactics’, but sometimes, ends needs to find their means. And what Dazai needs, is to find someone who can move the escape plan along; someone who's miserably single - too lonely, too awkward and too eager to object to the game Dazai wishes to play.

The target comes into view. A young man with a haunted look in his eyes and a terrible sense of fashion: The sunglasses atop his head and the smooth leather jacket (worn over a pastel green slim-fit suit) screams *single and going through a severe quarter-life crisis*.

There’s a half-smoked cigarette hugged tightly between his lips, and he's chewing on it like someone who is in desperate need of affection.

Excellent. Dazai is about to show this gentleman some affection.

Dazai winks at him, and the man elevates his brows in response, eyes shining with pleasant surprise through the thin grey wreaths of smoke, which curl up in fanciful whorls from his comfort-object-cigarette.

Dazai waves him over with a wide smile. “That’s my financé,” he announces to the security guard whose hand is still resting on Dazai’s shoulder.

The guard grunts in lieu of an answer, and while it does sound like an affirmative kind of grunt, he doesn’t release his hold.

The not-so-fashionable young man steps closer and Dazai waves vigorously. “Darling, can you please convince the security-sir here to let me go.”

“I -uh?” The man’s polite smile stiffens, his steps falter, his eyes waver - even his dumb sunglasses seem to reflect a sense of confusion. He clearly has no idea what’s going on. Which, fair.

It’s fine. Dazai is happy to take over. “Aren’t you happy to see I’m okay? Tell me you’re happy to see me.”

“... I’m... happy to see you,” The man echoes rather unconvincingly, sounding like someone who is reciting from a script. The way he punctuates his performance with a hungry drag on his cigarette does add a bit of flavour to his flavourless style, though.

Dazai laughs. “I’m happy to see you too, chérie” he cocks his head, and shifts his weight so that the angle is perfect for the streetlights to hit his cheekbones from above and make them sparkle, “let’s go home. I’m tired of this place -- it’s awfully uptight.”

The security guard snorts quietly. “You're not wrong about that,” he agrees and finally drops his hand from Dazai’s shoulder. He lifts a finger and points it like a gun at the young cigarette smoking man. “Keep an eye on this one, okay?" he mumbles, gesturing with a chin-lift in Dazai's direction. "Make sure he doesn’t get into more trouble.”

Dazai briefly wonders how he continuously finds himself in the company of people who talk about him like he isn’t there.

Please.

He huffs and puts on a poisonous smile. “Oh, don’t worry about that, sir!” he chippers and then stalks forward to wrap himself around his ‘fiance’.

The man responds automatically, folding an arm around Dazai in a half-embrace, which coils around Dazai like a boa constrictor.

Dazai twitches at the horrifying physical contact. Still, he disguises the distaste that flows off of him in waves with a bright grin and a light tone. “I’m always hoping for trouble, but I promise to be good for the rest of the evening.”

The guard grunts again, eyes glazed and hands finding their way to rest in his pockets. “Honestly, you can do whatever you want, as long as you do it far away from here.”

“Yes, yes. It’s fine.” Dazai says, waving a hand flippantly, “I can tell when I’ve overstayed my welcome." He smiles up at the young man he’s oh-so-lovingly embracing. "We’re leaving now, right, honey?”

The man’s face lights up brighter than his outfit. “I... yeah?” He looks very unsure about the situation, but his reflexes seem to want to play along because he hugs Dazai tighter.

It’s frankly becoming unbearable, Dazai can feel the touch as a sticky dampness that seeps through his clothes and bandages to stain his skin.

He bites back a discontent whimper. Forces it to turn to ash in his throat as he covers up all uneasiness with charm. “I take that as a yes,” he forces out with a curated smile on his lips.

The oblivious man answers the fake smile with a real one, and if Dazai cared for pity, he would pity the poor guy. As it is, he sees no need to allow such sentiments to cloud his vision - it’s too late to backpedal anyway.

He redirects his focus to the security guard who is *still just standing* there, simultaneously spaced-out and solid.

Dazai gives him a good glare. “You may leave us alone now.” He realises that it sounds a bit, well… unwarrantedly rude, but he's running out of will to force the illusion of having social skills.

The big guy doesn't seem to register the rudeness. He lifts his shoulder in a very lazy shrug and gives a curt nod before turning and prowling back into the bright and charming falling-over-itself-to-kiss-it’s-own-ass yakuza gallery.

“So…” The man who still has an arm slung tightly around Dazai’s core looks at Dazai with impossibly wide and sparkly eyes. “Lucky me? You’re coming home with me tonight?”

Dazai cowers. “Ah, about that.” He untwines himself from the disgusting choke-like hold. “I’m sorry about the misunderstanding. But no, I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Oh,” the man responds intelligently. Luckily he has the grace and wit to allow the escape easily, arm dropping from Dazai’s side and smile transforming into a fake little thing.

“So if you’ll excuse me,” Dazai says as forcefully as he can without sounding straight out mean.

A moment of strained silence, and then the man lets out a muffled “of course.” His tone is as polished as his smile (even if it does little to mask his disappointment).

Dazai takes a step back - a gradual escape - and adjusts the lapels of his suit jacket. “I really am sorry, and I would follow you to the end of the world if I didn’t have important matters to attend to,” he offers, a courteous lie meant to appease the man. It doesn’t seem to do the trick - the man's facade is like rain dripping down stained glass, and Dazai once again feels the good old barrenness of good intentions.

The man takes a step back, looking down and away. “Yeah, well… have a good night,” he says on a slightly brighter note, which Dazai picks up with a dazzling smile of his own.

“You too, sir.” Dazai bows curtly before spinning on his heel to walk off, head high as he whistles a melancholic tune.

His whistling does leave much to be desired. It’s one of those skills he’s probably never going to perfect (the puff and blow of disharmonious notes, which leave his mouth do seem to fit the mood though).

He fishes out the phone from his bag, quickly types Chuuya’s number, and waits.

… … … Nothing.

Dazai frowns at the phone. He can think of a near-limitless number of perfectly good and innocent reasons for Chuuya to not pick up. *Except* - call it intuition, call it logic - Dazai has a strong suspicion that the real reason is a bit more dramatic.

Because *Chuuya wouldn't ignore a call just because, would he?* A thought that's true but unpleasant - Dazai can't entertain it without feeling like it's coming down on him like a guillotine.

Dazai shoves his hands into his pockets and proceeds to stroll around the building as fast as he can without attracting attention. Nose towards the moonless sky, arms casually swinging by his sides, and a spring in his step. He's terribly good at looking like someone who doesn't know how to worry…

As he rounds the corner of the building, the crowd of people that seems to roll upon Tokyo's streets like waves dispurses significantly.

A deep breath through his nose and a little exhale that's whisked away by the light breeze. When the city's natural smell isn't overpowered by the scent of rich people's perfume, it smells like asphalt and something else that is mostly unpleasant yet somehow charming.

Following the curves of the patterns on the pavement, Dazai makes another turn.

An unpleasant cold feeling starts overtaking his body. It moves like slimy tentacles. Wraps around his wrists and feet. Creeps towards his core where it grabs hold and squeezes. *Hard*.

He feels nauseous again, and this time it's intense enough that it's impossible to ignore. He recognises the feeling.

It's that *thing*. The chalice.

"*I knew it*," he whispers, and the words feel cold on his lips.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. I really hope you liked it. If you did, feel free to leave kudos and a comment. I love hearing from you <333
I've already written a good 60% of chapter 11, so hopefully, I'll be able to finish that and update soon-ish.
the next chapters are going to be dramatic and action-packed ^^

Chapter 11 is full of 😱 action
and chapter 12 is going to be all 😏 action.

10. Bloodlust & Moonlit desires (red, red, red)

Chapter Notes

Hello sunflowers!

I hope you're having a wonderful day. Please just politely ignore how long it took me to finish this chapter (even though I said it wouldn't take forever. Oops).

This chapter has been through A LOT but finally (5 billion drafts and edits later) it has reached its final state. I really hope you like it! I put all my love into it, and it nearly killed me.

Happy reading <3

_____

Chapter notes:

Ushanka = Fyodor's hat.
Eidetic memory = The ability to recall an image from memory with high precision after seeing it only once. Basically photographic memory.

_____

Chapter warnings: Blood, guns, fairly detailed description of someone in shock, fleeting mentions of self-harm, Dazai's fascination with death.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

My soul bleeds and the blood steadily, silently, disturbingly slowly, swallows me whole.

- Fyodor Dostoevsky, Complete Letters

Dazai can hear his heart pound in his ears. That old steady drag transformed into a frenzied cascade of noise - beating away at a hundred miles per hour. Briefly, a thought enters above the hammering static. An echo of *oh, is this how I die?*

It's a ridiculous thought. Dazai discards it. Tries to control his disobliging heart. Fails.

His body continues to react as though thrown into a large tank of cold, muddy water. Vision blurred at the edges, hands tingling, lungs deflating - the sight in front of him leaving him utterly and completely paralysed.

Chuuya is fighting someone, *something*, and Dazai wants to jump in to help. To save the day in whichever little ways he might be capable of... but he can't.

Can't move.

Can't think.

Can't function.

--- --- --- --- --- --- ---

Somehow, his reflexes catch up to his offline mind. Distantly, he notices himself move. Out of the light. Into the dark. Into a pile of trash behind an overflowing container to be precise.

And from his hiding place among the shadows of the alley, he can observe without getting noticed.

It's not that he's *surprised* by the scene he witnesses play out in front of him, but somehow... he fails to understand... what's going on?

A steading breath. Inhale. Exhale. He lets the stench of trash fill his nostrils and hook to his brain like an unpleasant (but much-needed) reality-anchor. He just needs to get his *logic* to corporate, and then, *then*, he can organise things into neat categories of cause and effect; make sense of things.

It's just... it's unreasonably difficult.

Things seem blurry, murky, unclear. It's so dark; the moon still hiding behind a thick sheen of clouds, the brick-lined dead-end alley only catching lost rays of flickering street light.

He closes his eyes, rubs them, opens them again. Chopped-up images hit his retina. Images of *Chuuya.* Flailing movements, long shadows and red.

Red, red, red.

Red?

Dazai blinks rapidly, wills the fog in his head to retreat. Urges his senses to come back online. Applies his seemingly defunct intellect and forcefully connects those dumb dots that would usually connect themselves: Chuuya is fighting an onrush of red, liquid bullets. He's bucking and struggling with a desperation that's very off-brand for him, clearly expending most of his energy on defence rather than offence - just keeping the torrent of shots at bay.

Dazai squints. Breathes through his nose, nostrils quivering. The continuous shower of red bullets decidedly isn't made of paint or some other funny gimmick splatter-thing. No, even

amongst the overpowering miasma of trash he has taken hiding in, Dazai can quite clearly detect the metallic tang of *blood*.

His eyes trail along the path of evidence, landing on the source of the attack. Everything aligns with Dazai's expectations, and yet his skin crawls with not-wanting-to-witness-any-of-it.

It's that stern priest character, still looking pale as prowling clouds and solemn enough to deserve his own shrine somewhere miserable. He holds the chalice in one hand and uses an ability to direct the blood-blitz with the other.

And again, to Dazai's un-surprise, the chalice glows with some ability-like sorcery; something which unquestionably has to do with blood manipulation. It appears to interact with the priest's ability in interesting ways, producing drops of dark-red blood out of thin air.

The chalice's ability glistens in shades of yellow and orange, roman letter scribbles swirling around in a fast, not very reader-friendly blur. Dazai is so not in the mood or right state of mind to read, but he does make out a fragmented reference to 'sanguis sānctus'.

Sacred blood.

Dazai swallows, and it feels like shattered pieces of glass all the way down his throat. *Sacred* is just about the last word that comes to mind in terms of conceptualising the current predicament. In fact, he thinks that a bit of divine intervention might be needed to fix it… Arahabaki.

He cranes his neck to look back at Chuuya, gauging his body-language and pinpointing all the signals. The familiar red glow of *For the Tainted Sorrow* twines elegantly around him, but it's significantly dimmer than it usually is, flittering as though taking exhausted, heaving gasps.

And lively Chuuya looks drained, his movements, albeit precise, aren't nearly as punctuated and dynamic as his usual grace allows. The strikes of blood seem to connect and cling to him like hungry leeches - wringing energy out of his body with every blow.

Dazai's ongoing nausea intensifies. He's half expecting the world to just be shorn apart around him. Another unhelpful thought enters. *Is this real?*

Once again, Dazai's senses start dimming against his will, attempting to retreat into an unplugged oblivion. Refusing to allow it, he frantically digs his fingers into his arm to feel something, *anything.* Pricks and pokes at the bumps underneath the bandages, scratching at wounds to summon the pain that will stop the brain-fog from descending upon him. He will slit his arms to ribbons if that's what it takes to produce a coherent thought.

"*Think,*" he whisper-hisses at himself as a reminder, an affirmation.

But thinking only gets harder when Chuuya's knees buckle under him. His strength in the field is unmatched, and yet his attempts at dodging the attacks grow progressively ill-fated.

He looks like he's simply balancing plates, waiting for things to come crashing down around him.

The assault of blood-bolts strike with a force and sophistication comparable to a squad of martial arts fighters. Well-aimed, Calculated. A projectile of blood hits Chuuya right across the temple, splattering all over his forehead.

Unable to look away or apply any kind of mental filter, Dazai defenselessly takes in all the second-hand distress. He can't justify the way he's prolonging the ongoing shipwreck of a situation by doing absolutely nothing to stop it, but he feels paralysed - distant as though stuck in a recurrent dream-loop of being a backseat-driver in a car without breaks.

So as though hypnotised, he watches as Chuuya crumbles to the ground, blood dripping from his dishevelled fringe and into his eyes in a way that must sting.

Still, he keeps his eyes open. Hauls himself back up with a force that Dazai is sure is driven exclusively by willpower and a severe refusal to give up.

The moon peeks out from behind a cloud, bathing the alley in a haunted misty light. Chuuya lets out a broken cough. Blood trickles from the corners of his mouth, a dark red that almost shines black in the moonlit alleyway; a well-known shape, a well-known colour (one that Dazai will sometimes pull from his own body, just to reassure himself that he is in fact human). Red. Blood. *Chuuya*.

And suddenly Dazai recognises the visual input for what it is: An emergency. A call for action.

He steadies himself, shaking hands gripping the solid waste container that serves as his personal hiding-screen. He closes his eyes for just a second - just to collect the last of his scattered thoughts - images he can't escape; the blood in Chuuya's mouth. The blood Dazai wishes was his own. He reopens his eyes only to be met by *red*.

Red, red, red.

Jolts of unspeakable feelings shoot through Dazai's core like electric shocks. A pain that nearly shuts off his breath and forces tears from his eyes. And no, Dazai doesn't cry (not unless it's part of a strategy) but the urge to cause destruction thrums under his skin, and it's overflowing; threatening to burst, spill, demolish. It's no longer an easily ignorable itch; it's the bottomless existential horror of the demonic emptiness that lives inside him, sharp claws scratching at his insides, ready to escape.

The rush of madness clears his mind, sends sensation rushing back into his body; thoughts like torrential rain, breaking the dam of inertia - pouring the burden of genius back into his bones.

Jolted out of his shock-induced straitjacket, he sets out to collect the facts, analyse the data, reach the obvious conclusions and formulate a plan.

First priority: Chuuya. Must keep safe. At all costs.

The trick is to allow Chuuya to keep *himself* safe. All Dazai needs to do, is free him from the stranglehold of bloody-priest-plus-bloody-chalice that restrains him.

Second priority: Make sure the painting stays intact.

A quick inventory confirms Dazai's expectation that The Great Wave is in one piece - wrapped in a plastic bag, discarded on the ground, seemingly thrown to the side carelessly (which is less than what a fine piece of art deserves, and Dazai would wince at the unrefined handling of a valuable cultural product, but it is what it is - dire circumstances and all that).

Third priority: Get hold of the chalice.

It's the least important goal, and Dazai would let it go if he could, but he can't, so…

"Okay, okay. On with it," he mutters to himself, noting that despite his mental clarity, there's still a lingering vertigo haunting his body. Punishment sounds like a sweet motivation-boost and he wants to slap himself across the cheek, but alas, a slap hard enough to force some stability into his ruffled composure would also be too *loud* and attention-grabbing.

Instead, he focuses his vision on Chuuya's drooping form. Lets the... concern (or whatever mortal feeling it is he's currently throwing in Chuuya's direction) incentivise him as he allows himself just a few more seconds to run a mental calculation of all possible scenarios - ensuring his grand master-scheme meets all three priorities on his list.

With some hardship, he forces his attention to leave Chuuya and search out the offender who Dazai has no doubt is to blame for this mess. Not the priest ambushing Chuuya, but the man who is hiding in the safe obscurity of long, dense, cave-like shadows - the real bad guy, who is operating the strings from a comfortable position, removed from the gore of the fight.

Yes, there he is, the ushanka wearing Mister Creep from earlier.

A pretentious rat of a person, really. Still looking wealthier than the seven seas (not a single stain of blood on his white attire and, oh, does he look smug about it), still setting Dazai's nerve alight with agitation, still wearing that infuriating sly smile on his face.

He returns Dazai's gaze; looks directly at him, eyes violet and full of venom - full of unvoiced meaning. Almost like he thinks he's doing something remarkable by holding spine-chilling eye contact.

How very vulgar.

Dazai shifts his weight as to cover the involuntary quiver that rumbles through him like a mini-earthquake. Has Rat-Man really been aware of Dazai's presence the entire time, just standing there looking mildly entertained?

Seems an awful lot like it.

So... Creepo must really, truly think he has nothing to fear? That neither Dazai nor Chuuya could pose much of a risk to him?

Arrogant.

Bookmarking that piece of information, Dazai straightens all the way up. Acutely aware of the still-wet spot of water on his shirt and the garbage dump he stands knee-deep in, he feels a terrifying psychic equivalence to his physical form and surroundings. Clammy. Filthy.

And yet he pushes it down, finds his most flawless nonchalant attitude. Shoots the man in the shadows a glazed smile.

“I’m going to need you to put a stop to this unnecessary brutality,” Dazai says, his voice, although steely, seems to drown in the tumult of the ongoing fight.

The man must hear it clearly though because he responds with that sickening smirk of his. “What’s so bad about brutality?” he mouths, voice low, but loud enough for Dazai to detect the faintest hint of a very well-disguised Russian accent.

Dazai narrows his eyes. “I see no need to cause needless pain.”

“It’s part of the divine duality. He who overcomes pain and fear will become God himself.”

Dazai *would* scowl at such nonsense, but he’s too invested in appearing aloof. What kind of god is this man faithful to? In any case, it’s a revealing statement of ideology. In the name of psychological profiling, Dazai decides to dig a little further.

He tilts his head quizzically. “I see. Trying to overcome yourself, are you?”

The Russian doesn’t answer, but his aggressive silence is all the confirmation Dazai needs.

Upper hand temporarily obtained, Dazai takes to making requests. “Please. Can we put a pause to the fight and talk about it?” He keeps his gaze firm but calm. Lifts his chin to signal that he expects compliance.

The Russian’s smirk transforms into a grimace for a short moment before it settles back into its standard mocking shape. He takes a step forward into the artificial light of the street lamps. The tail of his long white coat drags behind him, the gold cuffs on his wrists gleaming as he slowly raises his hand with oh-so-much performativity to the delicacy of his movements. “As you wish.” He snaps his fingers. The sound rings like a gunshot. Low and dark and cutting into the crevices of Dazai’s auditory system, grating on his nerves.

The fight stops abruptly, the continuous shots of blood stopping mid-air, falling to the ground, staining the concrete like thick brushstrokes of varnish and violence - a provocative piece of performance art.

Dazai would dwell on the beauty of it, but there’s no time for appreciation of life imitating art mid-negotiation. He lifts his gaze to take stock of the temporary cease-fire.

The blood bath may have been put on hold, but the priest hasn’t deactivated his ability; it flickers brightly around him, and the chalice in his hand radiates a deep orange glow of ability-magic too. His body is stock-still, posture stiff and face blank as though hypnotised - which, *interesting*, but not exactly shocking.

And then there's Chuuya - clearly still bound by the wicked blood-ability-duo, exhausted, faded and toppled over, *For The Tainted Sorrow* dim and ineffective.

Dazai braces himself internally, knowing that he is going to have to act like the lifeboat until Chuuya has the opportunity to re-charge. He much prefers to see himself as the swirling waves, but he'll accept the role that the circumstances have assigned him. And by everything holy or otherwise, he's going to get that gross chalice with its gross ability to let go of Chuuya. Even if he drowns doing it.

Fingers twitching, Dazai represses a nagging impulse to pick at his nails (or preferably, peel them off), and redirects the bulk of his focus to his target - meets the Russian's gaze with an unblinking stare.

An immutable silence sinks into every crack and crease of the narrow alley, heavy like a headache and static with anticipation. Who dares to break it?

...

Dazai decides to do it before anyone else gets the chance; in game theory, the optimal strategy is to launch a total counteroffensive on an enemy who has attacked you - isn't that what Mori-san always says? *Crush the enemy. An arrogant enemy who feels invincible is the most vulnerable opponent of all.*

He clears his throat. "Thank you. I found the background noise of bloodbath very distracting. Now we can talk."

He doesn't receive an answer, but the Russian *does* give a curt nod, signalling for Dazai to continue - an invitation Dazai instantly picks up. "Time for a proper introduction? We could start over and hopefully resolve our disagreements peacefully?"

The Russian snorts, lifting one shoulder in a shrug as though Dazai's sincere proposition reads as casual banter to him. "Sure."

"Brilliant," Dazai sings as he steps out from behind the overflowing container that he (apparently ineffectively) has been hiding behind. Out into the spotlight, trying to look nonchalant with a buzzing urge to throw things boiling right under the surface of his carefully controlled demeanour. "Let me start by saying, good evening. It's a beautiful one, isn't it?" He takes a few more light steps forward as he gestures vaguely towards the starless city night-sky with one hand and uses the other to brush a lock of hair behind his ear. "My name is Tsushima Shuji." He bows perfunctory, making sure to keep eye contact even when he lowers his head.

"Good evening, undistinguished guest," the Russian creep answers, not bothering with a bow - not even a handshake. What terrible manners.

He continues in a soft tone of voice, "I nearly thought I'd never get the -*pleasure*- of making proper introductions, but I'm glad you're done hiding." A self-satisfied grin stretches across his face, paints his features in a way which suggests that the whole thing is amusing to him. As though he has any right to talk - what with being super shady himself.

Dazai kind of wants to rip his god-loving heart out and sacrifice it in some ritual. Not that he particularly believes in the efficiency of those, but he will organise one purely out of spite.

Instead, he covers up his sadistic tendencies with an exaggerated simper. “Yes-yes, hiding is fun, but it got a bit gross in that pile of trash… I'm sure you wouldn’t understand. Anyway, I didn’t catch your name, sir?”

“Fyodor Dostoevsky, if you must know.”

“Lovely to make your acquaintance, Dos-kun, and I’m sorry to interrupt this delightful little back-alley rendez-vous, but-”

“Yes, I'm sure you’re terribly sorry,” The Russian, *Dostoevsky*, bulldozes over Dazai’s attempt at civilized conversation. “No need to worry though, you’ll just have to pretend that you haven’t seen anything and convince your friend to give up the brave fight he’s putting up. We were simply trying to leave peacefully in the night when he had to go and notice us.”

“Didn’t look particularly peaceful to me, and I’m afraid that won’t do.” Dazai slips his best negotiation-voice into his vocal cords, “you have something that I want, and I’m not leaving without it - which means that neither will my darling fiance.” He motions to Chuuya with a little dip of his head, “he’ll do anything for me, you see. If I want something he’ll move heaven and earth to get it for me, isn’t that right, Cherie?”

He sways his hips as he turns his body slightly to address Chuuya. Lowering his head in the process, catching a little wind that makes his hair dance about his face and hopefully covers him in a pretty little sheen of mystique. And yes, maybe he's angling for a bit of an intimate conspiratorial moment in the eye of the storm.

Chuuya doesn’t respond to the gesture, though. He groans loudly and looks up from his hunched-over position to send Dazai a withering glare.

“Of course,” he says flatly, and considering his weakened state, the fact that he finds the energy to lace his words with exasperation is admirable. “Anything for you, Daz-*Shuji*.”

Despite Chuuya's words having a sarcastic, almost accusatory, bite, Dazai preens at the attention anyway. He lowers his chin to his shoulder, schooling his facial features into something sweet; a private smile, eyes turning into little slits and everything.

Chuuya receives the sweetness by digging his nails into the ground.

How adorable, Dazai could wring affection out of Chuuya all night long (and he very much intends to), but it will have to wait - because in his peripheral vision, he catches Dostoevsky’s violet eyes darting back and forth, presumably making keen observations.

And *that* is something Dazai needs to attend to. “What?” He angles his body back into a more confident position, meeting Dostoevsky’s imploring gaze.

“Fake names, fake covers, and supposedly fake costumes.” Dostoevsky’s tone is thoughtful as his eyes settle on Dazai, unwavering, burning. “I should have known. The shrimp isn’t part

of the Fumiko-gumi's security detail at all, is he?"

"Did you just have the fucking audacity to call me a shrimp?" Chuuya croaks from where he's flat on the ground. He sits back on his heels; tightens his fists as though trying to crush air molecules to smithereens.

Immediately, he's cut off by a swirl of orange ability emanating from the chalice - Chuuya goes incredibly pale and falls forward again, grazes his hands on the concrete, probably hard enough to bruise. "Not a shrimp," he spits, clearly not letting the argument go - even when the blood is being drained straight out of his body.

Dazai feels an inexplicable urge to reach out, brush the hair out of Chuuya's face, kiss the blood from his bruising knuckles, promise he'll get his revenge... But then again, Dazai also feels like he's going to throw up and the fact of the matter is that it's not the time to give in to impulses.

Dostoevsky ignores Chuuya's assertion with the most dismissive of hand waves and continues his monologue. "So, I'm guessing you two are professional thieves."

It's not a question, and Dazai feels no need to make corrections - he can absolutely roll with that assumption. He turns back towards Dostoevsky, stance softening as he nods slowly. "Correct. We're professionals and we got away with the main attraction of the night." He winks and points to the plastic bag that's discarded on the ground next to Chuuya, "The Great Wave is in there."

"Ah. I did hear the alarm go off earlier. What a grand show you two put on." Dostoevsky lets out a sigh that sounds distinctly fake, "I personally prefer more refined techniques." With a languid motion of his pale hand, he signals towards the priest who's still standing straight as a stick and clinging with white knuckles to the chalice. "My..." he blinks at the expressionless, seemingly spellbound priest, "... my... *companion* and I covertly slid out the antique we wanted - right under the nose of security."

He sounds rather boisterous, and it's frankly nauseating.

"Impressive, you and your *puppet* are a cute duo," Dazai clicks his tongue, letting a little judgement slip into his pitch. "Toying with a poor priest's head, though? Really?"

Dostoevsky answers the accusation with a wink, seemingly unashamed - even proud - of the methods he uses to get people to follow his bidding.

Gross. Dazai suppresses the sneery comment that sits on the tip of his tongue. Restless to be spat out.

There's a droning ache in his bones, a feeling - an intuition, maybe - and it's probably trying to tell him he's a hypocrite. He shuts it out. Whatever broken disaster he might be, he refuses to believe that he employs his own (scarily similar) techniques in such irresponsible ways...

"Anyway." He says, redirecting the conversation. Distracting himself from thoughts he doesn't dare to finish. "You thought me and my partner were part of the Fumiko-gumi?"

Following Dazai's prediction, Dostoevsky nods, jaw tight like dwelling on the mistake sets his teeth on edge.

Narcissistic injury. Convenient. Dazai knows how to play men with such vulnerabilities like marionettes on strings.

He shifts his weight, cocks his head, paints a bashful smile on his lips. "It's alright. We all make mistakes. I can assure you though, my partner and I are simply some wayward thieves trying to - what was it? *escape peacefully into the night*."

"Ah, true solidarity we share. It was all just a misunderstanding then."

"Seems like it," Dazai beams.

"Well, we should just separate peacefully then."

"You forgot the part where I want that lovely souvenir," Dazai sings, pointing to the chalice in the priest's hand, "I'm sure I can make much better use of it than your friend, anyway."

Dostoevsky's eyes widen just a minuscule, it's barely perceptible, but it's enough for Dazai to catch it. Surprise.

"So you know how it works?" Dostoevsky's tone is mostly flat. It conveys only a fraction of the understated surprise that still lingers in his gaze. It's so subtle, but it's there; a weak point in his shield - a weak point that Dazai will dig a spike right through.

"Of course, it's obvious! The chalice is an ability modifier. Am I correct?" Dazai smiles brightly but keeps his tone imploring, making it clear in the little gestures that he's leveraging this insight of his for a little bit of honesty in return.

"You're a clever little one, aren't you?" Dostoevsky says, tone conveying nothing.

Dazai hums. Looks up through his bangs. softens his eyes. "Maybe I am..." he murmurs and adds a modest shrug of one shoulder, "A clever little one, with a great love for fancy little trinkets. Now, hand over the chalice." He stretches his hand out towards the priest who looks back with a void expression. The only spiritedness about his washed-out existence is the silver cross around his neck which catches a few stray rays of lamplight.

Dostoevsky chuckles quietly. "Jealousy is a disease. One that thieves are particularly liable to. Accept that you can't have everything that glitters and get better soon."

"You figured me out! I *do* like things that glitter," Dazai admits with a hint of meekness, "and that chalice-thing is so wonderfully mysterious. Let me at least get a better look - give me an opportunity to burn the image into my mind properly?"

"Hmm. Eidetic memory?"

"Yep," Dazai replies smoothly.

Dostoevsky lifts a finger to tap his lips as he glances between Dazai and the chalice as though deep in thought. It's clearly a show. He looks for all the world like someone who has already made up his mind and is just holding back for the fun of it. “And what are you going to do with that mental image? Just look at it?”

Dazai rocks back on his heels. “Of course.”

“How believable… Why would I allow it?” he asks, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Because you and I have a lot in common, it seems,” Dazai shifts his weight, lets his arms rest casually along his side to complement the other man's body language. “Blessed by the beauty of intelligence. Cursed by an ugly world that doesn't understand us.”

The man uncrosses his arms. A smile that nearly reaches his eyes flutters across his porcelain features. “How poetic. There is something so spiteful, yet open-hearted about you. I like you.”

“It’s mutual,” Dazai replies ever so softly, verbalising the lie in a disguise of genuineness. “Now, let me have a look. Why wouldn't you? What am I going to do? Snatch it out of your friend’s hand?"

Dostoevsky gives Dazai a flat look. "Well, yes. That would be my main concern."

Dazai shakes his head. "He’s using his ability and the chalice to confine my partner and I don't have much of a fighting ability. You clearly have the upper hand, here. Just let me get a look.” He flutters his eyelashes and smiles one of those impossible-to-say-no-to smiles, sweetens the deal with absolutely no promises of substance.

“No,” Dostoevsky answers. Simple. “I liked the idea better where we just each go to our own. You should be happy that I’m in a generous enough mood to even have entertained you for this long. I could have just killed you, you know.”

“Ah, you say that like you have much of a choice. If you *don’t* entertain me, I might blabber to Fumiko about who stole her favourite antique.”

Dostoevsky snorts. “I’d rather think that you and your partner did that. In terms of monetary worth, The Great Wave is far more valuable. If you snitch, I will too.”

“One, I don’t care, and two, What are you going to say? The brunette in a black suit stole it? The gallery was full of those all night. They won’t be able to identify me. If I tell them that the guy in ushanka did it though..." Dazai pauses theatrically, gestures towards Dostoevsky’s headgear. "Pretty sure you’re the only one in all of Tokyo to make such a bold fashion statement.”

“Pretty sure you’re the only one dressed as a mummy,” Dostoevsky shoots back without as much as a beat of hesitation.

Oh well. Not a bad point. Still, Dazai will work around it. “Irrelevant,” he sings in that tone of voice he knows to be particularly offensive - the one that slides in between his poor

conversation partners' ribs and twists until they squirm. "I told you I don't care if they know who I am."

"Maybe you aren't as smart as I thought you were."

Dazai makes his eyes dark and his smile bright. "Maybe I'm not. But again, that's beside the point, because *you* care."

Dostoevsky's eyes flash, but then quickly return to a dull violet indifference, his emotional state once again indecipherable - as obscure as the deep secrets of a bottomless lake. "I could call your bluff," he says, voice cool. "But really, I see no need to get stuck in wheeling and dealing."

"No, let's not be boring," Dazai agrees.

"Let's not. It's not like our agendas can't meet. *You* a persuasive little thief and *I* have nothing to lose so I'll indulge you." Dostoevsky confabulates; finds a self-serving logic that suits the situation he's been trapped in - just as Dazai predicted he would.

Still, Dazai is all too happy to play along. He clasps his hand and makes his eyes wide and dewy. "You're too kind, Dos-kun."

"Yes, it's more than you deserve, but I'm feeling generous. I should warn you though, my ability *Crime and Punishment* is deadly to the touch. I will hover my hand just inches away from yours, and if you try anything funny, I will touch you and your

life will be over. Understood?" He punctuates, by stabbing a finger in Dazai's direction. Again, a bit of a lack of etiquette.

Dazai nods politely, not forgetting his own manners. "Yep. That seems fair," he says, discreet on the outside, cheering internally. A lethal touch-based ability is undoubtedly fascinating, but it doesn't present a problem. *No Longer Human* isn't picky - it will devour anything.

He sways forward, the air tense with suspense when Dostoevsky presses up close against him, a nearness like deadly nightshade.

Dazai takes a steadying breath, fills his lungs with pollution-thick oxygen. He inches a little closer to his target, the ability-glow around the chalice fluttering slightly as he nears - as though startling in response to *No Longer Human,* to the call of the void.

"Very pretty," he whispers, fingers flexing against his thigh, motor coordination preparing for the sly move he's about to pull, "I still want it. Are you sure you don't want to give it to me." He steals a glance at Dostoevsky, not really hoping to have his request met, but it's worth a try.

Dostoevsky's face conveys nothing but a marble-cut sternness. Features smooth. "Positive."

Dazai sighs. "What a shame, guess we're going to have to fight about it then."

"How disappointing, you really aren't as smart as I thought you were," Dostoevsky sneers, suddenly sounding ten degrees colder, "why would you insist on a fight that inevitably results in your anticlimactic death."

"I insist on no such thing," Dazai wraps a breezy attitude around a half-shrug - the last attempt at goodwill before all hell breaks loose. "I'd suggest you just give up. Give me what I want and scatter off."

Dostoevsky laughs low and cruel. Like Dazai's suggestion strikes him as the most barbaric thing that has ever been said in a dark, dirty alley (which, doesn't seem fair - for someone so reminiscent of a rat, Dostoevsky hardly has the right to be sneery about *anything* that happens in dark, dirty places).

"Oh well," Dazai looks up and graces the two men in front of him with a genuine smile - one that's not even remotely trying to hide the violence in his eyes; it screeches like a cornered cat, feral inside him. "We can't always reach an agreement through peaceful means, can we? C'est la vie."

In one quick move he lunches forward, wrapping one hand around the priest's wrist and wrestles the chalice out of his hand with the other.

The sensation of the dynamic blood-manipulating duo of priest and chalice rushes through Dazai's veins, *No Longer Human* soaking up the unfamiliar abilities with a bottomless hunger.

Dostoevsky's hand slaps down hard on top of Dazai's, and *No Longer Human* immediately consumes it. Colour and glitz fade from Dostoevsky's ability and his eyes widen. Shock, disbelief, horror.

Dazai drops the chalice, and it hits the ground with a loud clang. The sound chimes high and ear-splitting, but it doesn't get to reverberate before he kicks it in Chuuya's direction with the tip of his shoe.

It's a wager of time - Dazai estimates that Chuuya has around 3 seconds to recover from the blood loss and get *For The Tainted Sorrow* to do its glorious gravity-thing before Dostoevsky overcomes the shock of the nullification enough to pull a gun and-

---*click-click*---

The sound of a gun loading echoes through the alley, and a second later, Dazai can feel the barrel pressing against his temple. Metallic. Cold. Endlessly enticing.

Accepting his faith whichever way it will play out, Dazai closes his eyes to images of having his brain splattered all over the alley's brick walls.

2 seconds.

It's an exhilarating feeling, balancing on the edge of life like that. Dazai smiles, savours the peaceful quiet of the moment, the sudden solidity of this fluid thing called life.

Like watching sand running through an hourglass.

1 second.

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The noise of extended thunder rumbles through every crack of the alley, the air so static with electricity that the street lights flicker rapidly before going out altogether.

Cracks start stretching across the concrete in enticing patterns. The earth starts moving - like a board game being tipped, all the pieces sliding to make place for a new winner. Chuuya.

As the world collapses around him, Dazai stands still. Serene smile on his face, music of victory playing in his ears. The weight of the gun against his forehead eases as it plunges to the ground. It lands with a loud clunk; drops along with its owner and his companion in a pile of falling dominos.

Oh, the thrill of winning a game. Still, Dazai doesn't think there's much for him to do with himself by way of celebration despite standing there, doing his best to look pretty and waiting for *For The Tainted Sorrow* to cause enough damage to scare off the enemies.

If they're smart, they'll run for the hills as soon as the earth returns to its axis…

And it does return. Abruptly so.

The sudden stillness is more piercing than the roaring noise of a localised earthquake could ever be.

Flat on his ass, next to where Dazai stands still and unscattered, lies a very sour-looking Dostoevsky. The priest is next to him, tangled up in his black robes and clinging to the cross around his neck.

Shock still lingers in the air, a deathly twitchiness taking the place of oxygen.

And then footsteps, *heavy* footsteps. They vibrate in Dazai's core with every crush of the already-cracking foundation.

Dazai is way too smart to take his eyes off his enemies, but somehow he finds himself turning his head, seeking Chuuya's familiar, comforting blue eyes.

Except they're not exactly blue - they're glowing a subtle red, pupils turned into the tiny slits of a predator. There's a bit of unhinged edge to his smile, a few marks of Arahabaki's burning rage starting to appear on his skin.

Corruption isn't needed for this, but whatever mix of emotion Chuuya is riding, it's feeding the god of calamity enough to make it scratch to get out.

"My-my," Dazai sighs - aiming for unflappable and maybe a little forbearing, but only succeeding in sounding breathless. The thing is... feral is such an attractive look on Chuuya. And for all the timing may be off, Dazai can't ignore the swirl of heat in his stomach. It's

hard not to mirror the glee of destruction, and so, he also can't repress the unbalanced feeling that ripples through him. It settles as a grin on his face, and he probably looks as high on chaos as he feels.

Something is wrong though; Chuuya isn't looking back at Dazai as he ought to. He's looking at… Dazai turns his head to follow Chuuya's line of sight - and oh.

Dostoevsky has regained his composure, re-acquired his gun and is once again brandishing it at Dazai.

A strange move. Dazai does estimate the Russian fellow's intelligence highly, but his head (or maybe his ego) must have taken a serious blow if he's resorting to something *that* dumb.

Leaning into the condescending attitude that comes very naturally to him, Dazai shakes his head. "Really? Haven't you had enough? It's time for you to give up."

Dostoevsky smiles - like someone who has lost but is beyond the point of caring. Maybe he finds a bit of power in defeat, in reaching the sacred land beyond logic where only the blind instinct to destroy remains. Good for him. Dazai isn't one to take that pleasure away from anyone, so he plays the target with a soft smile on his lips. "Okay, then. Shoot. I want you to."

Dazai sways a little closer, fueled by adrenaline. "You can't miss from this close-up. Come on, do it. Free me from this oxidizing world of a dream. Shoot before Chu-."

Dostoevsky's finger tightens around the trigger. He pulls.

The loud ringing of the firing gun blends with a whoosh of glowy red speed. A whirl of sensory information.

Dazai falls. Looks up. Sees Chuuya hovering above him, red with his ability. The bullet Dostoevsky fired is at a standstill where it touches Chuuya, enveloped by *For The Tainted Sorrow*, stopped in its trajectory by gravity itself.

Dazai leisurely pulls himself up to standing again, his knee hurts and it's probably bruised. He smiles the brighter for it. "Ah, Chuuya. Thanks for taking a bullet for me. You're the best," he says dusting off his suit jacket with flourish, "Was just about to explain to the mastermind how your ability works and why he should get out of here while he can."

"The bitch mastermind and his bitch friend can suck it," Chuuya sneers, an angry non-sequitur that pulls a laugh from Dazai before he even has the chance to consider if he should allow such displays of emotions to slip out.

Oh, the power Chuuya holds.

Picking up the bullet with his ability, Chuuya turns it 180 degrees. Hovers it in the air. "I have perfect aim," he says dark and dangerous as he points a finger at Dostoevsky, "and you, sir, have ten seconds to get up and leave before I use my perfect aim to hit you right where it hurts the most."

Dazai leans to the side, peaks out from behind Chuuya and waves a hand in the general direction of a scowling Dostoevsky. “You really should do as he says. He’s probably the most powerful ability user you’ll ever meet and what you’ve seen so far is just a little preview.”

“Is that so,” Dostoevsky seethes, and he must no longer care to disguise his accent because it’s as thick as the disdain in his voice.

“So it is,” Dazai replies cheerily, “I’m sure you can guess at what it is.”

Dostoevsky’s upper lip curls. “Gravity manipulation.”

“Gravity manipulation and a god of calamity who would love to see you consumed by a black hole,” Chuuya corrects, his voice vibrating with the same angry force as the bullet that floats in the air next to him. “Now, get out. I'm running out of patience.”

Dostoevsky lets out a sound of consent, nodding his head slowly. “Very well.” He dusts off his knees, languid sweeping movements, like he has all the time in the world. Passive aggressive to the core.

He then stands up in a fluid movement and waves at his slack-jawed companion with the barrel of the gun pointed at him. “We’re leaving, Father Hawthorne.”

When he doesn't get much of a response, he grits his teeth, hauls the priest up to a standing position, and drags him along - out of the ally, into the dark of the night, slinking off like the rats Dazai much think they are.

“Dasvidaniya〜” Dazai calls out.

Dostoevsky waves a hand behind himself without turning to look back. “This won’t be the last time we see each other,” he says, words like poison-tipped arrows.

They slowly fade from vision, disappearing into the night, with more fanfare than they deserve, cloaks flaring and shadows elongating behind them like dark-grey flames.

“Pfffff,” Dazai rolls his eyes, “what a self-important drama queen.

“I’m sure you can relate.” Chuuya spins, still glowing with his ability, anger, and something else - something hot and electric, not that attractive predatory instinct, but something that has his pupils wide enough to drown the blues and reds of his irises. Black holes that suck Dazai right in.

But it’s not time to fall apart.

It’s also not time to watch Chuuya fall apart - so he reaches out, cradles Chuuya’s cheek, lets *For The Tainted Sorrow* seep into his own hollow body where it gushes around in waves of hot energy, blazing like a dopamine high before *No Longer Human* devours it. Dazai inhales deeply. Savours the borrowed surge of energy. He wants to keep it. To claim the foreign feeling of aliveness under his skin as his own.

Selfish. Greedy.

Refusing to let the good feeling be contaminated by self-doubts, he searches Chuuya's eyes for resonance, for a sign that Chuuya needs this too. Touch. A break from the no doubt heavy burden of housing a god.

Chuuya's smile is soft with all the unspoken reassurances Dazai could ever hope for, but… he shakes his head a single time and pulls away.

The wonders of physical connection withdraw from Dazai's body, seeps right out and leaves him feeling like an empty vessel.

He drops his hand by his side, ignoring his twitching fingers; the urge to reach out again. He won't ask why Chuuya denies him the pleasure of touch because he does have some dignity, but he *does* furiously search through his mental catalogues for a viable explanation.

"Stop panicking," Chuuya says, lifting a hand, radiant with his gravity, "I just need my ability for one little thing."

Dazai very deliberately schools his features. "No one's panicking."

"Sure, Mackerel," Chuuya says, sounding not-at-all convinced by Dazai's assertion. He flexes his hand, waves it around a bit, *For the tainted Sorrow* gleaming around him. The air suddenly becomes dense with electricity, and the street lights turn back on again, illuminating everything in misty shades of yellow light.

"Oh-o, Chuuya is pulling that cool trick again." Dazai cheers to... shift the mood… or whatever… probably to distract himself from feeling uncomfortable in his own skin, if he's being honest. There's simply too much restlessness and too little outlet. He wants to rip something apart - or better yet, be ripped apart.

But Chuuya doesn't come through. He just stands there, looking back at Dazai with a look in his eye that would probably count as objectively unreadable, but Dazai still reads it for what it is: the push and pull of conflicting passions. The desire to be gentle and the desire to claw something to shreds all wrapped up in confusion.

"Are you okay?" Dazai asks, begrudgingly noting there's a bit of wobbliness to his voice. *Awful*.

"Yeah." Chuuya nods slowly, an unusual stiffness to his movements. "And you?"

"Yeah. I'm good. Splendid." Dazai takes to toying with his sleeve, the moment too tense to make the added intensity of eye contact bearable. He's hyper-aware of the texture beneath his fingertips, and even more aware of the sigh that Chuuya releases as he flops down rather inelegantly to a hunched over seated position.

"I need to sit down," Chuuya says, letting out another deep exhale that sounds heavy with something like relief. "Just give me a second."

Dazai frowns. "Are you sure you're okay?"

“I’m fine. Just… stop overthinking for one second and come sit with me.” Chuuya pats the ground next to him, somehow managing to make the dirty, hard concrete seem inviting.

So Dazai goes along with it, drops down to a seated position, arranging himself into something that ought to look comfortable from the outside. There's a fluttering ache in his chest - one that he can’t quite place, but it’s just about the most painful thing he has ever felt.

Chuuya shuffles a bit, as though uncomfortable - even through the whole sitting down thing was his idea.

Dazai is confused. Dazai is never confused.

Well, almost never.

“So?” Dazai lets the unspoken question hang in the air as he folds his hands in his lap. It feels unnatural, but he doesn’t know what else to do with his unusually clumsy self.

“So,” Chuuya repeats, eyes gliding over Dazai, landing on the awkward ‘hands in lap combination’. “That was… something,” he adds as an afterthought, although, it doesn't seem like much of an addition to the stale conversation.

Dazai nods, kind of at his wits’ end, not really knowing the script to this particular play. “It sure was.”

Turning his head slowly, Chuuya seeks out eye contact, and Dazai follows along because he feels in a cooperative mood. And Chuuya’s eyes are pretty. Very pretty.

“What was that about?” Chuuya asks, mostly calm but somewhat wavering beneath the placid surface.

“Chuuya needs to be a bit more specific. I’m not a mind reader.”

Chuuya snorts. There’s a little not-quite-there smile tugging at his lips. “Aren’t you? Could have fooled me.”

The laugh Dazai uses to answer is only half genuine, too apprehensive about the direction of the conversation to be relaxed.

And just as expected, laughing doesn't avert any disasters; Chuuya's smile is withering at an alarming speed, transforming into a straight line that signals that awful thing, which Dazai so hates to elicit: concern.

“Shoot. I want you to," Chuuya says, voice eerily flat and un-Chuuya as he repeats Dazai's impulsive words, "free me from this oxidizing world of a dream.”

Dazai swallows, drops his gaze to look at his dumb hands in his dumb lap.

“That was nothing,” he declares, flippant. He doesn't know how else to approach that particular subject.

“Didn’t sound like nothing to me,” Chuuya says, intolerably soft. Like he’s talking to a scared animal.

Apparently Dazai can’t catch a break. “Well, not *nothing*,” he says, voice light with delicate huskiness and a general vibe of dismissiveness, “It was a demonstration of my impressive acting skills.” He plasters the most obnoxious smile on his face to sell the point. The point being: *leave the topic alone, or I’ll make you regret it.*

Chuuya gives him a look that speaks of being too exhausted to mobilise anger. “Okay, I get it. You don’t want to talk about it.”

Dazai shrugs. “Not much to talk about. I’m a good actor, and you’re clearly jealous.” And because he can’t resist getting a little wicked around his defensive edges, he adds a playful counterblow: “I’m not going to sit here and rub it in your face, though. I’m not an unmannered protocol-gremlin like you, after all.”

And at that, Chuuya's tired look does spark with anger. “You’re can be *so* fucking annoying sometimes. Why do I even-”

“Because you love me?” Dazai asks. It's meant as nothing more than a joking diversion, but to Dazai’s carefully concealed panic, Chuuya’s eyes widen like it’s more than that. Oops. Red alert. Abort. “So that may have come out more presumptuous than I intended. I didn’t mean it li-”

“Shut up,” Chuuya says, but with no bite to it. There's a twitch to his eyebrow, and it's mirrored in the way he rocks the heel of his shoe against the ground - all sorts of complex emotions to the subtleties of his movements.

Dazai doesn't quite know what to do with it. “Are you pretending to be mad at me now?” he asks as neutrally as he possibly can.

"*Pretending*? No. Just... as I said - you can be so annoying sometimes... but I'm not... you're not..." Chuuya purses his lips, clearly not happy with his word choices. Or lack thereof. "What I'm trying to say is…” he runs a hand through his hair, It catches in the tangled strands, and he winces. "I’m not sure what I’m trying to say, actually.”

A single little laugh spills from Dazai’s lips. Entirely unexpected and entirely genuine. “It’s okay, Chuuya. Words are hard.”

Nodding along, Chuuya scoots a little closer. Smiling again - a smile that matches the magnetic softness of his nearness. “I’m just… really glad you were there to do your thing.”

“My thing?” Dazai asks, leaning into Chuuya. So close now.

“Yeah. The strategy thing. Good job, genius.”

“Oh.” Dazai is sure that there are a lot of terms out there for someone who always finds a way to win the game. *Genius* is one he’s very used to, but he prefers to refer to himself as practical. Practical and suitably modest. He’s not going to take all the credit. “My job was

simply to peddle us down the road to success. I just sat up the stage for you to do *your* thing. You know, threatening violence and almost letting the beast out."

Chuuya's nose twitches. It's oddly cute. "The beast?" he asks, eyebrows raised, amused, but possibly more puzzled than anything.

"Mhmm. A friendly god deserves a friendly nickname."

Chuuya's little nose-wrinkle intensifies, the corners of his mouth lifting into half-laugh. "It's not a thing you can be *friendly* with."

"It *is*," Dazi insists, enunciating the words with sagely self-importance. And then, because the seed has been planted, and he really doesn't know self-preservation, and he must have left his impulse control somewhere among the garbage they sit in, and… so many reasons, he adds, "gods love me."

"What is it with you and thinking everyone loves you, all of a sudden."

"Am I wrong?" Dazai draws a bit of hair behind his ear, making sure his side profile reveals all of his nonchalant smile. The smile of someone who can't get hurt, no matter the answer to his question. (Hopefully).

Chuuya offers a smile of his own. It's bright enough to blind, but there's a squinting slant to his eyes - like they're stretched by tenterhooks. "Someone keeps fishing," he says slowly. It sounds like a calculated non-answer.

Dazai lifts his shoulders, tugs his chin. "I'm sure I don't know who you're talking about."

"Not buying that." Chuuya grunts, letting the objection transform into a long exhale that lingers in the air like a comfortable almost-silence. "You always know, don't you? Like how I'd get there in time to stop the bullet. It was a close fucking call, but I think... I *hope* you knew." It's not subtle at all - it sounds a little like a plea and a lot like an attempt to reroute the conversation.

Dazai allows it though. It's not like he would know how to handle a love confession should he receive one, anyway. "Now it sounds a bit like *you* might be fishing, Chuuya. But I guess I can indulge you." He pauses for a moment, lets a bit of suspense build for his anti-climatic declaration. "*Knowing things* is just a matter of stacking probabilities."

It's not exactly the whole truth, but it's the closest he will ever come to explain his thought-process. He raises a finger to point towards an imaginary list of data points, "the odds that you'd seize an opportunity to flaunt that extravagant ability of yours were good, so it wasn't much of a gamble. I knew you wouldn't fuzz up."

Chuuya blinks a single time. Then he bursts into laughter. "*Fuzz up?* " he sighs between laughs. "Who says that?"

Dazai blinks, not exactly surprised because Chuuya has been known to be weird, but still slightly mystified. "*I* say that. There's no need to be unnecessarily crude."

“I’ve *heard* you say fuck. You literally asked me to-”

“Yeah well, that was a tactical use of the word,” Dazai explains (although he rather thinks it's too self-evident to warrant explaining).

Chuuya’s shoulders still shake with laughter and Dazai can feel the vibration through his own body. It’s warm and fuzzy and *everything*.

Dazai picks up the chalice. Toys absently with it to distract himself from how weak he feels, fingers idly tracing the patterns that swirl around the stem.

Chuuya’s laughter trickles off, but it leaves a pleasant fizz behind, vibrant in Dazai’s bones.

“What exactly is this thing?” Chuuya asks, his hand making it into the line of Dazai’s vision, angling to touch the chalice too.

Dazai holds it out for Chuuya to explore. “… It’s some kind of ability modifier. It affects blood flow, but I'm not sure about the extent of it. Looks like the priest used it to drain you of not *just* blood, but your ability too?”

“Yeah. It took a lot away from Tainted.” Chuuya traces the edges of decoration around the chalice, then wanders further; a single finger drawing a line up along Dazai's hand. "It was weird. Not quite like touching you. I still had a little of my ability left but it made me feel… weak.”

“Must have been a foreign feeling for you,” Dazai ponders.

Chuuya hums, a glimmer of something almost bashful etching into the soothing murmur of his voice before it diffuses into the ether. He dips his head towards the chalice they still hold with almost interlaced fingers. “What do we do with it now?”

“I have a feeling Mori-san is looking for it.”

Chuuya nods a couple of times. “Right. Of course, the boss of the mafia would be interested in such a thing,” There’s very little emotion to his voice other than a subtle good-natured lilt. Uncharacteristically mellow, probably high on endogenous chemicals. There's an easy softness to him and it’s juxtaposed against the blood that paints his presence - He looks marred and chaotic. Tight security uniform torn, hair wild, lips bloody. Red, red, red.

And Dazai’s pristine suit may still be intact, and the stain of water on his shirt may be less gory looking than blood, but he feels so very underdressed in comparison.

He swallows the growing lump in his throat and breathes in courage as the wind glides past them. He sets the chalice aside just as the moon makes an appearance, peeking out from behind clouds and the blanket of pollution - colouring everything in a calm, glowy white highlight.

It makes Chuuya’s presence seem impossibly more attractive - attractive in the most tactile way - in a way that makes Dazai’s fingers itch to touch no matter how undeserving of such niceties he feels.

That’s what courage is for.

He bends towards Chuuya’s ear, close enough that he can smell the cocktail of oxytocin, dopamine and endorphins - the reward of feeling safe, the excited tittering aroma lingering after the fight.

“Please?” he whispers, and bathed in soft lunar light with everything but his own feelings clear and bright, he fully expects Chuuya to understand what kind of obscure, dark-side-of-the-moon request he’s making.

The kiss is light at first. Tender. Soft.

It’s not enough. Dazai’s hollow heart cries out for more, begging to bleed all over Chuuya.

A broken exhale, a frantic search for something to hold on to. He Grabs onto the nearest thing - the lapels of Chuuya’s uniform - digs his nails in; externalises the desperation that he doesn’t dare voice.

And Chuuya must understand Dazai’s strange coded language because he responds immediately. Pushes Dazai gently, but with conviction, to lay down on the filthy concrete like it’s a bed of roses, and crashes their lips together.

The shared points of contact define Dazai's awareness, intention draining from his brain and seeping into his skin, nerve endings alight, drawing solidity into his shaky existence. And there, in a dark, dingy back alley, littered with trash, he feels clean and whole.

Still, his needs have never been wholesome. He needs to feel desire like a razor blade against his skin. Needs - impact.

Arching his back, he changes the angle to deepen the kiss. Demanding and shameless, but he can’t care because he’s on a *good* trip. Chuuya follows his movements, body sliding around Dazai with the grace of a dancer, hands wandering, mapping, taking over like vines spreading across Dazai’s body, touching all the right places.

Good. But still not enough. Dazai tries to be fair in his little games, but the rules of this particular one aren’t clear. In an attempt to articulate the fuzzy terms, he makes a noise in the back of his throat, digs his fingers into Chuuya’s hair.

It has the opposite effect of the desired one. Chuuya presses against the force. Pulls away, breaks the kiss, sits up, hands leaving Dazai; cold and miserably untouched.

Chuuya tilts his head to the side, eyes narrowed a little, looking a lot like someone who’s waiting for something.

“Hey,” he says, and somehow it sounds like a whole conversation, honest and rounded.

Dazai blinks. Pulls himself up to a seated position. Searches Chuuya’s face for answers to unspoken questions. “Hey,” he echoes. Ever so intelligent. Ever so eloquent.

He wants to say more... but no matter how fast his brain is, no matter how many different variations of words it can spit out in perfectly formed sentences, he can't think of anything that sounds right. It stings like getting a papercut from a yet unsent love letter, and he's losing the courage to send the bloody thing.

"I..." he cuts himself off when he notices the shaky quality to his voice. He hates. Everything. So much.

"You?" Chuuya prompts.

The words in Dazai's mouth evaporate as the nerves that run along his spine dig into his back like needles. Needles with strings attached.

Dazai sighs. "I Don't know. I'm sorry." Maybe he *does* know, but he's constitutionally incapable of telling an unadorned truth, and he has no desire to lie. It's too complicated. Every time someone opens their mouth, it's because they *want* something, but Dazai doesn't think he gets to claim such privileges.

"It's okay," Chuuya tugs a lock of hair behind Dazai's ear. It must have come undone at some point during their too-short escapades.

And now Chuuya's fingers brush through his hair so casually. It's unfair. Dazai's internal chaos intensifies tenfold, and it clashes horribly with the mood.

"Don't," he whispers, finally finding somewhat suitable words, "don't be gentle."

The gears shift in an instant. Chuuya's eyes take on a glow, his ability simmering under his skin with a hotness that Dazai feels second-hand through *No Longer Human's* nullification. It's electrifying. Dazai's blood sings with something loud and sparkling, a tune of trapped longing that rises into a roaring crescendo as they collide with very unevenly matched momentum- Chuuya's burning lips smashing into Dazai's with a force that should seem inappropriate but doesn't.

A bottomless sea catching fire.

Dazai tilts his head back, and Chuuya moves with it - clever like that. So good at listening to the things that aren't said. He makes a little noise that Dazai wants to drink out of his mouth - so he does exactly that; crashes back into Chuuya like a rolling wave.

Sneakily (or maybe not so sneakily, who cares), he crawls into Chuuya's lap, stretches and then collapses against Chuuya's chest as he uses his hands to grasp for purchase, digs into hair, and shoulders, and everything he can touch. He can feel Chuuya's heartbeat through layers of clothes - synchronises his own to match it.

Chuuya's hands wrap around the back of Dazai's neck, pulling him in, impossibly closer. And as one hand starts wandering, travels the line of Dazai's spine, leaving a trail of heat in its wake, his hips twitch.

Propelled by the motion, Dazai leaps forward, grinds against Chuuya's abdomen and *almost* whimpers.

The hand on Dazai's back clenches, fabric pooling under Chuuya's fingers, the same way desire pools in Dazai's stomach. Dazai needs *more*.

Maybe Chuuya is a real-deal mind reader because he grants the unspoken wish immediately, nips at Dazai's lips - hard enough to sting - licks into his mouth. Dazai gasps, but the air is stolen right out of his mouth. Chuuya kisses like he does everything else; with a bombastic grace that leaves Dazai woozy and knocked out of the game - in a playing field beyond winning and losing.

Thoughts shatter like glass and the broken pieces rattle around Dazai's skull like bright prisms of desperate, unconditional *want*.

He can't even care if he's not supposed to want things, because he *does*. So much that he feels unstable with it - which adds up to: underdressed, undeserving and unstable. That doesn't stop words from spilling from his mouth, though. They flow with little care for how embarrassing they might sound in broad nightlight: *"Want. You. So. Bad."* A broken-up secret whispered between kisses.

He pulls back to look at Chuuya for reassurance or something disgusting like that. His mind is a prolonged buzz of white noise that sounds exactly like the image in front of his unfocused eyes. *Chuuya*.

Chuuya makes a noise that probably doesn't mean anything specific at all, mostly Dazai interprets it as a garbled exclamation.

It's encouragement enough for the time being though. Aching with anticipation, Dazai claims another kiss - a kiss made of teeth, and tongue, and some cocktail of emotions that has Dazai drunk and stupid. He sneaks a hand towards Chuuya's trousers like it's the only thing he *can* do. The ball is already rolling, and Dazai needs more and more and more, he sees no other option than to accelerate, to propel himself into Chuuya's warmth, to demand--

A hand taps at his shoulder, and Chuuya breaks the kiss. Cheeks pink. Hair tousled. Breathing heavy. "… We... we're not," he stammers between breaths (way more breathless than someone with his physique should sound).

"We're not *what?* " Dazai tries very hard to sound confidently-demanding-but-ultimately-careless and not like the repetitive melody of a melancholic music-box that he feels like, *not what? not what? not what? not what you wanted?*

He inhales through his nose. Holds his breath. Just hoping that it doesn't show on his face; that the idea of what they are or aren't, matters more than the oxygen in his lungs.

"We're not doing this in public," Chuuya clarifies.

And oh, that's okay. Dazai exhales the tension. Of all the things they could be or not be, this seems like one of the least terrifying. He chases after Chuuya - just to confirm that they are

indeed *something*, wheedling for another kiss because he still has heaps of unchecked impulses pulsing through him, a rhythm louder and deeper than his heartbeat.

And Chuuya meets him halfway. Closed lips, closed eyes. Tender like that. A little too sweet to be entirely comfortable but Dazai will take it.

Fluttering his eyes open, Dazai bites his lips as he fights the smile that threatens to expose just how gooey he feels. “You know... we kind of did a semi-public one already.”

Chuuya wrinkles his nose, but he looks more amused than anything. “You just had to ruin the moment, didn’t you?” he says, and it sounds like a compliment - his hands, eyes, and all of his attention still on Dazai.

Dazai laughs. “I’m only stating facts.”

“So am I. We're covered in blood, and surrounded by trash. This is gross.”

“Gross?” Dazai gestures towards the obvious bulge in Chuuya’s trousers. “Mini-chu doesn’t seem to think there's anything gross about this situation.”

Chuuya groans. “Never say mini-chu ever again.”

“Chuuya is just jealous that I'm on nickname status with all his best assets,” Dazai says, running a finger down Chuuya’s chest, wondering if Arahabaki can hear him.

Chuuya’s features slip and slide through various emotions, settling on something painfully self-assured. He smiles, crooked and absolutely gorgeous, then opens his mouth to say something. And Dazai sees it coming from a mile away, but it still hits him like a bucket of icy water, when Chuuya says, “who knew you were so obsessed with me.”

Dazai drops his exploratory hands. He might be blushing, he’s not sure, but there’s a stinging heat rising into his face. He makes his eyes as cold as his face is hot and levels Chuuya with a scowl that would make most people shiver.

Chuuya just leans forward and kisses Dazai’s nose. He smells faintly of tobacco, and citrus, and everything else Dazai has been conditioned to find pleasant.

Now, *that* is gross.

“*Chuuya*,” Dazai warns, tone like a knife cutting through the air, menacing the way it is when he’s interrogating hostages.

But all that does is make Chuuya laugh, a deviously soft little thing of a sound - like all the pent up violence in Dazai’s being doesn’t bother him one bit. “Back to the hotel. Then I’ll take you apart,” he says, a million pretty promises engraved into his words.

Dazai accidentally breathes in too much air, then coughs awkwardly into his sleeve and pretends that it doesn’t feel like he’s dislodging his whole heart in doing so.

Chuuya grins, apparently entertained by Dazai's dire fight against his traitorous body. "The wait will be worth it," he says, a dangerous amount of suggestion to his low tone.

Unfairly attractive, really.

Dazai coughs again. "Is that so?" he asks, ignoring his ongoing case of breathlessness as he tries to school his features into something suitably aloof. "Does Chuuya want to bet?"

"Knowing you? Not particularly, no."

Dazai gives Chuuya one of his best pouts - the one that he has been told is irresistible on multiple occasions.

"You're not cute." Chuuya drips.

Dazai returns the criticism with a soft flick of his wrist. "And you're not nice."

Chuuya rolls his eyes. "Whatever." There's a little bit of a sneery edge to his tone but it's quite obviously put upon. "Tell me about this bet, since it's so important to you."

The feigned indifference is a funny backwards way of showing interest, but it's not like Dazai is any less obscure, so he's not about to judge. "Glad you asked," he says, clapping his hands together, "the bet is that if the wait isn't worth it, you have to play the piano for me."

"Oh. I would have done that anyway," Chuuya says around a breathy laugh. "let's go. I'll play the piano for you as soon as we get back."

"Hmm," Dazai keeps his voice level as to not give away too much. Secretly desperate, yes, but he refuses to think he's easy…

...

… Okay, maybe he can allow himself to be a little easy for Chuuya and promises of sweet music. "You have yourself a deal," he says, reaching out a hand for Chuuya to shake.

Accepting the handshake, Chuuya grins. "And maybe, after I've played for you, I could spread you out on top of the grand piano and..." Chuuya trails off with a lift of his eyebrows that would look so intolerably over-confident on literally anyone else. Probably does on Chuuya too if Dazai could ignore the hyperactive butterflies in his stomach long enough to be honest with himself. Oh well, honesty is overrated and the deeply subjective, biased matter of fact, is that he likes everything about the way Chuuya looks.

Maybe he even likes it a bit too much. Dazai feels sharp and bright with it. With *this thing* between them - lightning the whole place up - yet his voice is quiet when he says, "okay. Back to the hotel."

The loaded meaning of his own words hit hard, and he struggles to suppress the shiver that runs down his arms. His clothes - his skin - is too tight and too hot. He wants to shrug off his suit jacket. Get rid of his shirt too. Maybe even the bandages.

Instead, he rolls up his sleeves. Loosens his tie. It's *still* not time to fall apart.

He stands up, a slight ache running through him as he stretches. It's not an unfamiliar pain, but it *is* bothersome. The bruised knee is a nuisance as much as an existential reminder of the constant inevitable pain that's so intrinsically linked to being alive.

He re-adjusts his blazer, popping the collar like he's getting ready to face a storm.

"You should carry me home," he says, offering a hand to Chuuya along with a perfectly innocent smile.

Chuuya accepts the hand. Lets Dazai help him up to an upright position. The mellow streetlight beats down upon him. The light seems to fracture into butterflies, fluttering around his shoulders and reflecting in flashes on the edge of Dazai's vision.

"You should carry me home," Dazai repeats because for all he recognises the objective ridiculousness of the request, it seems important.

Chuuya smiles like he's going to say yes... but then shakes his head. He bends down to pick up the painting in its plastic wrappings and stands up straight again. Clutching it to his chest like the treasure it is and not the bin bag it looks like.

"Sorry, princess. I'm carrying the painting. You're going to have to walk." He spins on his heel and sets off, striding away from any interjections Dazai might have.

Coward.

Mildly offended, Dazai seizes the chalice, relocates his discarded bag from a pile of trash, and runs after Chuuya. He easily catches up (the perks of having long legs), and falls into rhythm.

Step, step-step, the varying length of their legs not quite synchronizing, creating an offbeat waltz.

The music of shoes against the pavement is accompanied by the prettiest light show - Tokyo's streets covered in a sheen of hazy moonlight and bright neon signs.

The city streets are packed at all times of the hour, but the crowds disperse around them, curious, disgusted, horrified gazes side-eyeing Chuuya's bloody form. It makes Dazai feel grotesque and special, walking next to Chuuya like dancing on a moonbeam of notoriety.

"It's kind of nice, isn't it? Late-night city walks," Dazai muses.

Chuuya answers by bumping their shoulders together with way too much force.

Dazai nearly trips but regains his footing. For just a second he wants to say something bitter. The feeling of almost-falling reminds him a little too much of walking the tightrope that's stretched over his internal canyon of hollowness - the one he's always just one wrong move from plummeting into.

He doesn’t get the chance though because Chuuya is right there with a steadying hand and an effortlessly genuine sounding, “oops. Sorry.”

Dazai sighs. He feels exposed in a way that makes it hard for him to hide in the folds of mystery that he usually uses as cover. It’s strangely pleasant to be *seen*. “You’re forgiven, I guess,” he says as he looks straight ahead. Still, he notices Chuuya’s smile in the corner of his eye.

“You’re right. This is kind of nice,” Chuuya says.

Dazai has a sudden, absolutely insane impulse to grab Chuuya’s hand.

Dazai doesn’t even like hand-holding.

Luckily, Chuuya’s hands are occupied with the precious cargo of fine art, so Dazai doesn't have to overthink the possibility of making the mistake of reaching out.

Instead, he adjusts the bag-chain over his shoulder and stuffs his hands in his pockets. A melody sings in his veins, and he sees no need to not externalise it. Pursing his lips, he starts whistling an impressionist tune, pitch jumping around -- a major third and some twisting minor seconds. The melody blends with the moonlight, Dazai can sense the notes turn to harmonious powder as they escape his lips, and he has a feeling he can’t quite believe.

The original form of the song he's trying to replicate is barely recognizable, but something about Dazai’s off-tune attempt must resonate because Chuuya hums like he appreciates the soundtrack; like he knows the song by heart.

Maybe he does.

Chapter End Notes

Wahoo you made it all the way to the end of this chapter! That was a lot of words! Thank you for reading all of them <3

Just like for clarity’s sake, I’ll explain how I imagine the chalice works: It’s an ability modifier. If the person who holds it has an ability, it interacts with the holder. Hawthorne has a blood-related ability so the chalice interacts with his ability in a very powerful way (not quite creating a singularity like that time with Oda and Gide, but something like it). Oh, and it doesn’t work on Dazai because of No Longer Human.

Also, it’s pretty impossible to guess the song Dazai is whistling so I’ll tell you :3 it’s clair de lune (more of that banger next chapter).

I also took a bit of inspiration from Verliane’s poem clair de lune which inspired the song by Debussy. (Tout en chantant sur le mode mineur. L'amour vainqueur et la vie

opportune, Ils n'ont pas l'air de croire à leur bonheur. Et leur chanson se mêle au clair de lune.)

And feel free to ignore me because this is a tangent but your girl loves chasing squirrels so let me tell you. One of my favourite headcanon for these two is that they can't say "I love you," and they dance around it awkwardly forever. Sometimes they will say other things like "you're everything," or "I'm so glad I have you in my life," or even "I love waking up next to you," super romantic stuff but never "I love you."

And then… they say it for the first time on their wedding day. Thank you for listening I just had to get this out because I think about this all the time and it makes me so emotional ;__;

Hope you're having a lovely day and take care of yourself <33

(I love kudos and comments <3)

11. Complicated things - Part 1

Chapter Summary

Sweet music & dumb bois being in love and horrible at feelings.
(And also a little sprinkle of possessive Dazai as a treat).

Chapter Notes

Chapter notes:

- Dazai's claustrophobia makes an appearance again. It's very mild because he doesn't really know how to process fear - but it's there.
- Piano terminology:
Sustain pedal = pressing the sustain pedal makes the sound more reverb-y. when pressed, the sustain pedal "sustains" all the damped strings on the piano by moving all the dampers away from the strings and allowing them to vibrate freely.
Crescendo: A gradual increase in loudness.
Diminuendo: a decrease in loudness in a piece of music.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dazai reckons that stepping into an elevator is much like walking into a space pod. Preparing to take off into space, into the icy void where things loose meaning and boundaries dissolve.

So... not much different from everyday life, really.

Dazai spares a glance at Chuuya who looks unbothered, leaning against the elevator's steely wall with a half-smile on his lips, and arms gently coiled around the painting. Unfair.

Straightening his spine and swallowing his irrational unease, Dazai presses the button for their floor a single time. Nothing happens. Dazai squashes down the acidic impulse that twitches in his fingers to hammer an extra fifteen times on the button - he knows technology doesn't respond to pathos. Patience...

And patience pays off - after a dramatically prolonged moment, the doors do close with an elegant swoosh, the background noise of the lively hotel reception area drowning out in the process.

Quiet. Constricted. The elevator-space is dense with the smell of lingering perfume, with the blinding overhead spotlights that glare like all-seeing eyes - with everything but oxygen.

There's a subtle electronic buzz, and then they take off - rise towards their suite.

Dazai taps his fingers against his thigh. Focuses on his breathing - on being natural (an act he can never quite pull off convincingly). “We could have just taken the stairs,” he mutters because, apparently, his impulse control has completely given up the ghost and just passively lets half-developed thoughts turn into words. How undignifying.

Chuuya hums deep and tuneful but doesn’t say anything. Dazai is grateful for it.

A sudden unexpected deceleration sends nausea through Dazai’s core, and then they come to a stop.

With an unnecessarily loud ding, the doors slide open.

Two women waltz in, high-heels clicking, hands interlaced, and the smell of wealth wafting around them. They’re practically made of diamonds; glittery shoes - dresses - smiles. Pretty. So pretty that Dazai can physically feel himself withering next to them.

Another high electronic-bell sound sings through the cavernous space - through Dazai’s hollow core. Another swoosh of doors, and then it returns; the feeling of heaviness squashing Dazai’s poor brain as momentum works against gravity. As the walls cave.

Chuuya proceeds to look utterly unbothered, and Dazai proceeds to find it utterly unfair.

If only he could have some of what Chuuya has...

Very inconspicuously, he shuffles a little closer to Chuuya, heel toeing himself along until he’s pressed flat against Chuuya’s side. Finding space in being crowded; borrowing a bit of solidity.

If not for the fanciful company across from them, Dazai would distract himself further - share Chuuya’s breath, or slide to his knees or… so many wasted possibilities. *Patience*.

He finds another way to distract himself. Smiles politely to the two sophisticated young ladies across from him, noting the rings on their fingers that match just as well as their outfits.

They’re painfully beautiful together. Small, petite and perfect. Round cheeks and bright eyes - the eyes of sensitive souls... eyes that are ogling Chuuya rather unsubtly, fixed on his torn-up bloody uniform with morbid curiosity. It awakens something ugly in Dazai, a demon scratching its finger along the bottom of his stomach, stirring inside him.

It’s not that he thinks they’re *interested*. Not like that. They appear to have enough in each other.

He gives into the gut feeling though, leans on Chuuya, steals the warmth of his ability (and practically smothers him against the side of the steely metallic wall). He's aware that he's probably performing a tragic lack of confidence rather than the claim of ownership that he knows he can’t make anyway. Still, he will be pathetically antagonistic towards the idea of sharing. Of competition.

One girl laughs very subtly. It turns into a cough that she smothers in the back of her free hand as she averts her gaze, smiley and giggly as she looks intently at her sparkly shoes. The other doesn't know what's good for her, and keeps looking Chuuya up and down with burning eyes. She shifts her head to look at Dazai. He smiles back at her brighter, deadlier.

She starts giggling too, just as charming as her partner, little chimes tinkling and bouncing off the walls.

Totally fearless that one.

"You two seem to have had a fun night," she trills, a dimple digging into her cheek and an almost conspiratorial gleam in her gaze.

"We're planning on it," Dazai answers, just as melodically.

The girl winks at him. Despite her threatening perfection, she seems nice enough, so Dazai makes his smile a little less aggressive.

-- *DiiiIIIInGGGggg* -- the too-loud stop signal returns, ringing in Dazai's ears like a dead phone line.

The doors open and Chuuya stirs. He looks at Dazai with a pretty smile that stretches into his pretty eyes. Somehow, it only makes the ringing in Dazai's ears intensify.

"That's our stop," Chuuya says with all the dulcet softness in his voice that the elevator's sound system could only dream off. He pushes off from the wall, away from the socially inappropriate proximity Dazai so lovingly has been smothering him with for the entirety of the ride.

He's already halfway out the door, and Dazai is not one for being left behind, so he bows courteously at the two sparkly ladies before following on Chuuya's heels. He escapes the elevator, landing on solid ground, footsteps muted by a soft carpet.

Flower decorations and soft purple neon lights decorate the hallway to their room, wafting a synthetic freshness around Dazai's twitchy edges. Cold and hot at the same time, something he might interpret as excitement, but...

His cursed analytical mind is so very bad at anticipatory pleasures, too good at focusing on the potential landmines.

He just wants to feel something that isn't mediated by the oppressive weight of self-awareness.

He breathes in, sorts through the olfactory information; tunes out the itchy flowery scent and focuses on that faint aroma of blood, the grounding scent of tobacco and citrus.

Chuuya turns his head, purple light catching in tangled hair. "You're being uncharacteristically quiet. What are you plotting?"

"Not plotting. Just... thoughtful."

“What are you thinking about?”

“How quiet of a person I am,” Dazai says, flat and serious - even if he adds a smile to the cocktail.

Chuuya snorts. “Not around me, you’re not.”

“I guess not.”

“Okay. Good talk, Mackerel,” Chuuya stops in front of the door to their room and gives Dazai a look that reads a lot like a command. *Open it*.

Dazai is happy to follow commands if they’re in line with his own agenda, so he nods and fishes through his inner pocket for the little tin case he always keeps there - opens it, asses. Needles, pins, wires, thread, coins, razor blades.

“Hmm.” he digs through the mess with a finger, finds his fighter; a disc magnet.

He hovers it near the door’s electronic lock system, waves it around in small circles. It’s all about grace and agility - finding the right spots, the right movements. Quite like… well.

When he feels the subtle shift in magnetism, he puts the disc aside and finds a long thin hairpin. Sticks it in the narrow gap between the door and its frame, poking at the latch bolt.

Chuuya clears his throat. “The friendly receptionist gave us a keycard for a reason, you know.”

“Lost it,” Dazai explains, angling his head to give Chuuya an innocent look.

“On purpose?” There’s a crooked smile on Chuuya’s lips like he knows all of Dazai’s secrets. The idea of it is as terrifying as it’s exciting.

“Chibi has some strange ideas. Why would I do something like that?” Dazai refocuses his attention on the door.

He doesn’t have to look to know that Chuuya’s eyes are on him like lasers - he can feel it like heat and excitement burning into the side of his skull.

“Your motives are always so oblique,” Chuuya says.

Dazai huffs, but the sound drowns as the door unlocks with a loud click.

He pushes it open with plenty of dramatics, enters, slips out of his shoes and kicks them in the genkan. The bag falls from his shoulder with a thud that’s sure to get Chuuya’s attention - and then he peeks over his shoulder with raised eyebrows.

Chuuya isn’t looking back - he’s in the process of leaning the painting against the wall, delicate movements as he balances it and then flops down to sit. He slowly unties his shoes, takes them off, lines them next to each other.

Very well mannered all of a sudden. Adorable.

“Fuck, I’m disgusting. I need a shower,” Chuuya comments, nose wrinkled as he looks down upon himself, the dirt, the blood.

“Indeed. Utterly disgusting.” Dazai remarks cheerily.

With a roll of his eyes, and a grumbled “I actually said it, so you didn’t have to,” Chuuya presses himself to an upright position. If he’s still drained from the fight, it doesn't show in his posture. He brushes past Dazai, intent clear in his stride.

In a swift motion, Dazai grabs his wrist, hauls him back around. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“To shower.” Chuuya’s eyebrow quirks as though daring Dazai to stop him.

Dazai will.

He leans forward, raises a finger, hovers it right in the line of Chuuya’s vision, making him go all cross-eyed.

“Nah-ah.” Dazai chirps, waving the finger. “Music first. You promised.”

Standing in the doorway to the lounge, Dazai takes in the view. The curtains are drawn, letting light from the city- the moon- the stars, flow into the room and settle like dust upon the grand piano.

He grabs Chuuya’s wrist and drags him along - glides across the floor as soundlessly, as *gracefully*, as the backdrop deserves. Tries to mould himself into a shape that fits into the scenery. Soft. Ethereal. Quiet; the sound of Chuuya’s breathing and his heels against the hardwood floor the only sound.

Dazai releases Chuuya’s wrist. Crawls on top of the piano, claims a bit of the light for himself, lets it surround him like a weightless cloak of mystery. He feels in his natural element as he splays out on his stomach, arms bend at the elbows, head resting in hands.

“You can’t do that,” Chuuya says, reaching out as though to drag Dazai down, but then stops mid-air. “Actually… it’s fine. This is good.” His eyes trace the outline of Dazai’s body, settling rather unsubtle on the curve of his waist. “I like what you’ve got going on here.”

Dazai raises an eyebrow, seeks out Chuuya’s wandering eyes. “Chuuya is very indecisive.”

“If the lid is down, the sound won’t project as well and it will mute some of the resonance, but you look... uh, *comfortable* so just stay where you are.” He adjusts the piano bench, sits, wiggles a bit as he stretches his arms, opens the fallboard, flexes and bends his fingers a few times.

Dazai is about to comment on the theatrics of it, but then Chuuya's hands fall upon the keys, drop hard, land softly.

D-flat. A note deep in the bass. An alto third.

And then harmonies start swirling in rhythmically ambiguous patterns, capturing the essence of something that Dazai can't make out the details of - a sense of floating. A dreamy suspension of momentum.

Chuuya's fingers jump across the keys in perfect coordination with the shift of the pedals. Notes mingling with volume - sadness and solitude weaved into the diminuendos.

A sadness and solitude that Dazai shares.

It's a good feeling, being held by notes. And so, like a pliant dance partner, he lets his emotions follow along when the musical theme changes - when notes fall like water drops on a spring, evening out the melancholy, filling up the hollowness.

Dazai cranes his head to better observe Chuuya - his face, his hands; a composition of elegance. The stars (barely visible in the city's night sky) seem to have migrated into Chuuya's eyes, and those eyes narrow with concentration as the pace picks up. The sudden crescendo hits Dazai like a hot wind. Carries him away. Dopamine swinging inside his brain as it tries to find steady ground. He breathes out, gives up, closes his eyes and finds reward in just listening. And then - D-sharp. Again. The end.

Dazai sighs. Blinks his eyes open. "Mmmm. Lovely. Thank you for that. It was..."

Chuuya hums and looks up. "Beautiful?" He meets Dazai's eyes with a filthy sort of honesty. His eyes sparkle with it. "You're beautiful too."It's like getting hit by a flower and Dazai nearly sneezes, allergic to the pollen of it, the shamelessness of it. He's not surprised by Chuuya's directness though - he's just about certain that Chuuya says things like that on purpose - with the ulterior motive of getting under Dazai's skin (and much to Dazai's carefully concealed dismay, it kind of works).

"Chuuya," he says, clicking his tongue, letting a bit of mockery bleed into his voice. "you're not supposed to say stuff like that."

Chuuya raises an eyebrow. It looks like a challenge. "Why?" he asks, fingers stretching over the piano keys, tapping the middle C, creating a repetitive rhythm.

Nodding his head in rhythm to the not-quite-musical sound, Dazai finds his lecturing voice. "You can't just call someone beautiful. It's so cliche that it's…" he searches the catalogues of his mind for the right word, but it escapes him. Perhaps the word he's looking for doesn't exist. "It's offensive," he declares - for lack of a better word. It doesn't quite taste right on his tongue, but it will do.

He dips his head back to look at Chuuya over the tip of his nose.

Chuuya bites his lip, a curve of a smile hiding just underneath. Almost like he's holding back laughter. "Offensive? But you *are* beautiful. There's like-" he waves a hand vaguely as if signalling a concept too vast for words, "moonlight in your hair and everything. What else am I supposed to call you?"

"You're supposed to show me."

A subtle shuffling sound, and then the press of the sustain pedal. The irksome staccato rhythm turns into an ambient legato.

Dazai watches with suspense as Chuuya adds to the chord. Pointer finger hitting an E, little finger landing on a G.

"C major?" Dazai lifts his gaze from the porcelain keys. He hopes that it shows on his face just how insulted he is. "Really? Is that fitting of the mood?" He searches Chuuya's face for any indication that he might be playing tricks - finds a challenge - a smile blossoming on Chuuya's face, cheeks reddened.

"I bet you secretly know a lot of music theory," Chuuya says.

Dazai shrugs. "Maybe," he says instead of saying that he knows everything - there's no need to be obnoxious and even less need to make things miserable.

"Fix it then."

Dazai intends to. He bends his upper body over the piano's lid to press a key, pushing down on a B, adding a minor harmony to the ambient ring of the major key.

Chuuya hums. "See?" his eyes shine with honesty and everything else dangerous when he adds, "beautiful."

He lifts a hand - moves it in slow motion. The prey instincts in Dazai scream at him to cower and pull away, but another (possibly wiser) part of him eagerly hooks invisible strings to that hand and drags it closer.

The instincts collide. He startles when Chuuya's hand lands very softly in his hair, brushes through it. It's blistering but also gratifying. Dazai relaxes into it. Tries not to over analyse it but… it's hard not to at least wonder; someone using their hands to create music and then use the same hand to do something so banal…

From anyone else, Dazai would consider such shameless reverence a blatant attempt at manipulation, simpering sycophancy not worth paying attention to. This is Chuuya though, and there isn't a single line of dishonesty to trace in his face... He's so embarrassing. Too embarrassing. Dazai has to save him from himself.

Dazai wafts Chuuya's affection away with the wave of a hand. He leans forward and slams the same hand down on the piano keys. A disharmonious ring of notes that never should be played together fill the room and the cutting noise slices right through the thick layers of tension.

Chuuya, with his reflexes of steel, doesn't even startle. He does scrunch his nose into a perplexed little look though. "Wha-?"

"See?" Dazai says, pausing to let the dissonance send echoes into the night, to add a bit of drama, "*offensive.*" Bending his elbows to rest his chin in his hands, he offers Chuuya's his best attempt at humour- or polite honesty- or insult to injury- or something along those lines. "But..." he starts, a drunkenness on his tongue that tastes a lot like the kisses he wants to press into Chuuya's mouth, "maybe, you're beautiful too, Chu-chu."

Chuuya smiles and Dazai isn't sure what that particular smile means. He tries to read it, but the details are lost in the radiance of moonlight.

It all seems a little complicated all of a sudden, but he's not afraid of playing games with high stakes. So he clarifies his confusion, does what Chuuya has modelled for him, puts it out there in broad moonlight. "What are you thinking?"

Chuuya's eyes brighten impossibly, glowing with magnetism and Dazai is not above the laws of nature, so he gives in to the pull, falls right into their orbit. He leans forward.

But instead of being a good person and meeting Dazai halfway, Chuuya scoots back on the piano bench, putting more distance between them.

Unacceptable. Dazai scowls.

Chuuya answers with a grin. The nerve he has.

"Tell me, Chuuya," Dazai says, stretching like a cat, tips of his nails scratching at the piano's glazed surface, drawing screeches from the friction - a sound that makes the hair at his back stand. He hates it, but it is what it is; he has learned that very often, he will get his way if he just makes everyone suffer. Including himself.

It's an unrefined method. But it works.

There is a subtle twitch to Chuuya's eyebrow, a curl to his lip. It all evens out quickly though, transforms into something twinkling as he tilts his head, murmurs, "oh? I thought I was supposed to *show* you." He stands up, and in a single breath, he's right next to Dazai, crawling on top of the piano without a single concern for the delicate thing's construction or weight-bearing ability.

And suddenly things aren't complicated anymore.

A surge of confidence sets Dazai alight, fills him up and makes his body move on its own accord. It's a familiar feeling of fullness, but one that never lasts long, another temporary mask that doesn't quite fit.

He ignores the nagging emptiness in his core and how it hisses at the threat of happiness. He can't care about the later comedown when everything he wants is within arm's reach.

Want you so bad - His reckless admittance back in the dingy alley echoing in his head like a mantra. A revelation. "A-ha," he cheers, victorious because he wants to believe that the

conclusion is foregone, “you want me too, don’t you?”

Chuuya receives the reassurance-seeking antics with glimmering eyes. Like he’s not afraid of affirming anything, of drawing a solid line around Dazai’s shaky self-image.

“*Tell me*,” Dazai repeats, insistent, a sleek purr perfected over the years, gaze dropping to focus on the lovely bowed shape of Chuuya pink lips. Kissable.

Chuuya leans in closer, drapes himself on top of Dazai; his body a comforting weight, his ability a blanket of sizzling energy as *No Longer Human* devours it, making Dazai feel high on borrowed power.

Dazai sighs. Breathes in, smells blood and gore mixed with citrus, tobacco and *Chuuya*. A combination that has him yearning for a taste.

Angling his body to the side, Chuuya delivers another blow - shoulder a blade in Dazai's arm, voice a siren in his ear: “O-ho, Dazai is so indecisive. Want me to tell you or show you?”

Unfair. Dazai loathes finding himself in his own trap, having his carefully constructed cage rattled with his own words. Technically, he could find a way out of it, but he is reluctant to explain just how complicated the algorithm between showing and telling can be. He's even more adverse to fight against quicksand of denial - so he opts for the indelicate pragmatic truth. “Right now?” he lets out as airily as he can through his slightly gritted teeth, “*both*.”

And Chuuya complies immediately. “I want you,” he whispers on an exhale, gaze flicking dangerously between Dazai’s eyes and his mouth.

Dazai doesn’t know where to look. Too busy alligating mental energy to his sympathetic nervous system; trying to ease the melody of hyperventilation that sings in his windpipes.

But then he doesn’t have to look anywhere - doesn’t have to breathe. Anticipation shuts his eyes closed and pushes the last oxygen out of his lungs, leaves him floating at that edge of the universe --- until the collision happens. Chuuya’s lips meet his, soft and tentative and entirely unlike the explosion Dazai had imagined. The sweetness on his lips, an overture leading up to something louder, faster. Fingers stroking through his hair, ariose, pulling at the tight strings of nerves that send bright overtones down his spine. Chuuya holding his head with both hands, gently, yes, but firmly - in a way that might even be labelled as possessive - Dazai *wants* to label it as such.

It draws an unintended whimper from the back of his throat, and Chuuya pushes into it, coaxes Dazai’s mouth open.

It’s easy for Dazai to lean into the sweetness of possession, so he does - vision blurring, body melting. He can’t tell who pulls who in, but it doesn’t matter. What matters is that he can feel the weight of Chuuya’s body against every sharp edge of his own. He steals Chuuya’s breath and tastes gravity on his tongue, swallows the sparks in his mouth.

Seeking more heat, he bucks against Chuyua - licks into his mouth. He can feel fabric against his palm, so he moves his hand up, up, up until he can tangle his fingers in soft hair - and

twist. Chuuya groans and Dazai kisses him deeper.

It's maddening. Still too slow, time stretching towards infinity with every, shared breath. Lips, tongues, teeth - crashing. Chuuya seems to feel the rhythm in his bones, directs it with a steady hand - a hand that slides up Dazai's body and wraps around the back of his head. Tilting it until Dazai gasps into Chuuya's mouth, tongues exploring, sloppy and wet. It tastes like a promise that's immediately fulfilled as Chuuya's other hand wiggles around his waist, making his back arch. A private little galaxy.

And then Chuuya's gravity shifts on Dazai and he finds himself pulled up to a sitting position, mouth - somehow - still where it needs to be; nibbling and suckling on Chuuya's lower lip.

Chuuya pulls back, puffs a little breath, hot against Dazai's cheek. "What do *you* want, princess?"

A shiver runs down Dazai's spine, through his core, coils around his gut and deflates his ribcage. He bites his lip to stop his breath from rushing out of his lungs too fast. It's still not time to fall apart. Patience. Patience. *Patience*.

"Want…" there's no way of putting words to the abstract thoughts in his head, not without it sounding tremendously embarrassing.

That doesn't stop him from wanting to articulate them, though. He takes a shaky inhale and hopes for the best as he spits the confession out on an exhale, "wannabegoodforyou."

And then there's that devastating softness against his heated face as Chuuya crashes into him. A kiss on the cheek, razorblade lips stretching into a smile, holding back a laugh.

So. *Rude*. There's nothing to laugh at.

But then Chuuya dips his head to place kisses along the line of Dazai's collarbone. Hot, even through shirt and bandages.

Hyper-attuned, Dazai can still feel the slightly amused tilt to his pretty smile, as his lips make contact, again and again, soft - again and again. It tingles and *hurts*.

Dazai wants to break something. He sighs, flexing his fingers against Chuuya's bloody uniform.

"What makes you think you aren't already perfect to me?" Chuuya whispers, crystalline, sincere - resonating in sync with Dazai's crumbling defences.

The fact that it sounds too heartfelt to hide behind the plausible deniability of discursive aesthetics is what really breaks Dazai. It's disturbingly cliche, but it's no doubt genuine. A truth hidden in plain sight, blinding Dazai's poor eyes which are so conditioned to only be able to see truths through the smokescreen of lies.

Dazai can't help it. He does the thing he wouldn't accept from Chuuya... and laughs, startling himself with how plosive it feels when it bubbles through him. It's just - too much. Delightful

and absolutely mortifying. “Stop.” Dazai wheezes, “I told you not to say such offensive things.”

“You started this round.” Chuuya punctuates the words with another kiss.

A fully formed monologue sits on Dazai’s tongue - ready to be spat out. But before he has the chance to explain the important difference between starting something and having the tact to finish it, Chuuya interrupts, “shhhh.” He raises a hand as though to demand attention, then lands it on top of Dazai’s head, pats a single time. “Stop overthinking.”

An encouraging sentiment. Sweet but unrealistic.

The only thing to do with idealism like that is to smile. So Dazai does. Stretches his lips around the words, “easier said than done, Chu-chu.”

“I know.” Chuuya’s hand tangles in Dazai’s hair, fingers running through it, making a mess. “Shower with me?” he asks. A non-sequitur, but Dazai accepts the logic of it. He nods, and in their proximity, he almost headbutts Chuuya in the process. Chuuya startles, pulls his head back and levels Dazai with a look.

Dazai offers his most placating smile in return. “Whoops, sorry,” he sings.

『○』

The tiles are cold against Dazai’s bare feet, the heat of Chuuya’s presence a distant hum in his bones as he toys with the buttons of his shirt, deft lock-picking fingers a little numb. He looks down at his feet, the lovely socks with little pink dots. Drops his hands. Looks up again.

There's a long gold-framed mirror in front of him that he tries not to look directly into. It's illuminated by spotlights that project hundreds of watts onto the bathroom's reflective surfaces. Marble, gold, glass - gloss.

It all glows too brightly; melts into a molten syrup, sticky against Dazai’s visual system, spinning in circles along with the steam that emanates from the shower.

Lifting his hands in slow motion, he pops open another button - the last button. He glides the shirt off his shoulders. Shivers. Hooks a finger into the bandage around his wrist, but doesn’t undo the little clip that secures it.

Stuck. The part of his awareness that is dedicated to impression management rings an alarm saying that he’s probably coming across as skittish. He still can’t find the energy to do more about the dumb bandages though.

He meets Chuuya’s eyes in the mirror; eyes that are already staring back, intense, even through the shower fog. “This bathroom is bigger than my entire dorm,” Chuuya comments.

An odd thing to say, entirely unmatching of the look in his eyes.

Dazai hums, focus skating down. He notices that Chuuya has already dropped his uniform, standing in just his underwear.

A spark of heat cuts through the chill, but the effect is the same; Dazai shivers.

“Big is good,” Dazai muses, licking his lips, then realises his eyes may have wandered too far south and stayed there for too long to be polite. He looks away, catches his own reflection in the mirror. “But it’s also cold,” he says, apropos nothing in particular.

“That’s why you’re taking so long to undress?”

“Probably.”

Chuuya squints. “Don’t act shy, Dazai, I know you want this. You *planned* this.

Dazai spins around, looks at Chuuya directly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Chuuya’s hips slide to the side, hands to his waist, confidence carved into his silhouette. “Earlier, you stopped me from walking off to shower.”

“I didn't know it would end with you dragging me along.”

“You’re telling me you didn't calculate the possibility of it happening?”

Dazai purses his lips. “Well...”

“Thought so,” Chuuya says, inching closer, riding on a cloud of steam. “So tell me, genius,” his hand reaches for Dazai’s wrist - squeezes, thumb stroking along the edge of the bandage, *For The Tainted Sorrow* crackling with Dazai’s nullification, “how do you imagine this will play out? What is your plan?”

Heat clings to Dazai’s skin under Chuuya’s too-gentle touch, damp like the warm steam.

His throat feels dry.

“Oh, trust me,” he croaks, and it sounds less seductive than intended, but he ploughs on, wriggles his wrist out of Chuuya’s hold, runs a finger up Chuuya’s arm, then down his chest. “I have *plans*.”

“Tell me about these plans?”

Dazai drops his hand from Chuuya’s chest. Resumes the task of ridding himself of the bandages. It requires more mental and physical effort than it should, given how habitual it is.

He starts unrolling, the first scar surfacing, healed, but still not savoury. He keeps his eyes on Chuuya, searching for a negative reaction. Doesn’t find one.

Chuuya, it seems, is consistently unbothered by bothersome things.

Their eyes lock.

Dazai's focus flicks to Chuuya's mouth, noticing how it's slightly parted around an unasked question. He doesn't look uncertain per se, but he does look like he wants a formal invitation. Strange, but Dazai will do what he needs to do to speed things up. "You can help me if you want," he says, the sound of his own voice grating on his ears; cuts the message into sharp little pieces - but it gets the point across.

Again, Chuuya reaches for Dazai's wrist, turns it in his hand, inquisitive as a scientist as he starts undoing the bandages.

He doesn't know what he's doing, that much is clear, his pulse flutters in his fingertips, burning Dazai with every point of contact. Warm. Dazai likes warm. Tomorrow he'll have bruises, he's sure. Maybe not the visible sorts - but the ones that prickles under the surface of his skin; finger-shaped marks running up his arms like corruption.

He shudders, as the last bandages fall to the ground soundlessly. Tries not to over analyse the subtle changes in Chuuya's expression, the way his eyes roam, almost burning holes into the already scarred skin.

Chuuya's hands run up Dazai's sides, sneaking around his shoulders, tender. His eyes are overwhelmingly soft, contemplative as they rove across Dazai's face; scanning for something.

Dazai doesn't know if he can offer what Chuuya is looking for - he wants to be soft too, but he doubts that it's within his skill-set.

"So," Chuuya says, voice as velvety as everything else about his presence - except, of course, his knife-sharp softness.

Dazai shakes his head, gestures towards the shower. "Come on."

They step out of their underwear, slightly more awkwardly than Dazai is comfortable with, but oh well, a lot of things ere on the side of being too much for Dazai level of comfort, so it's fine.

Chuuya seems untouched by the aura of awkwardness though, so maybe it's just an illusion. In either case, Dazai welcomes it when Chuuya grabs his shoulders and walks him backwards into the shower.

Holding his breath as the water falls over his head, Dazai moves out of the direct spray. Pulls Chuuya along to take the spot under the water. Enjoys the view.

Drops fall on Chuuya's head, slides down his body, gilding the sharp line of his collarbones, the round dips of his shoulders, the planes of his chest; delicate, muscular. Gorgeous geometry. Angles that Dazai wants to explore with his mouth.

He opts for a slow build-up though; starts the exploration from the top by burying his hands in Chuuya's hair. It seems darker when wet, longer, cascading down in a tumble of crimson

swirls, curving down the nape of his neck.

Chuuya hums, drags Dazai closer by the waist - into the spray of the water, proper. Wet, vulnerable.

“I don’t like the way I look with wet hair,” Dazai comments, water in his mouth as he speaks.

“So your plan was to get in the shower, but avoid getting wet?”

“Avoid wet hair.” Dazai corrects, brushing away the locks that have fallen flat into his eyes, sticking to his face.

“You look fine.” There’s real perplexion in Chuuya’s tone, and it gets under Dazai’s exposed skin.

“I *know,*” Dazai emphasises because he *does*. He looks perfectly fine when he’s covered in layers of bandages and masks; when his hair is that particular kind of fluffy that looks perfect without seeming like he's trying too hard. Like this, though, stripped of all defences...

“Do you?” Chuuya asks, tapping at Dazai’s shoulder, gentle - but controlled. Like there’s a part of him that wants to grab Dazai’s shoulders and shake them.

It’s ridiculous. Dazai bobs his head from side to side in a vague gesture he hopes doesn't read in any particular way at all.

Chuuya must read it in some way though because his mouth sets in a determined line as he flattens his hand against Dazai’s shoulder. “You’re so pretty,” he says, and at this point, Dazai isn't even surprised because Chuuya *just says things like that.*

And it’s only salt in the wound when Chuuya, complements the praise with his hands, trails a scar with a finger, makes Dazai tremble, feeling electric.

Such an irresponsible thing to do while playing with water.

“Thank you,” Dazai says, to say something. To keep himself together.

It doesn’t quite work. Doesn’t stop the electricity from shooting through his body and making his legs go soft with it. Not that falling to his knees and claiming the privilege of putting his mouth on Chuuya doesn’t sound good in theory. But one thing is dick in mouth - another is the combination of dick in mouth and water everywhere; in eyes and nose, cutting off his senses. No, Dazai has slightly different plans.

Instead, he grips Chuuya’s arms tighter. Presses closer, skin-on-skin, wraps around Chuuya’s shoulders, closer still. He can feel water trickling down his back, anticipation coursing up his spine, thick and slick.

Then, Chuuya’s hands around his neck, dragging him down into a kiss, surprisingly light. It’s a chill on Dazai’s lips, tingling, wavering on a tightrope between exhilarating and torturous in its overpowering softness.

“Yes,” Dazai sighs into Chuuuya’s mouth, an answer to an unasked question, a deepening of the kiss. He pours himself into it, pushes all the sweetness he’s capable off into Chuuya’s mouth - and Chuuya drinks it up like it's delicious. Maybe it is? Dazai would love to believe that, would love to spend the rest of eternity glued to Chuuya’s lips, ignoring the parts of himself that aren’t delicate enough to fold around such moments of… happiness?

Feeling just a little dizzy from the lack of oxygen, he pulls back, kiss broken by a string of saliva (strangely enticing, the way it binds them together).

“Relax,” Chuuya whispers. He grabs Dazai’s wrist as though he wants to guide it somewhere, but doesn’t.

Dazai pants and the air he takes in is thin with hot steam. “I am relaxed.”

He feels Chuuya clutching his wrist, thumb stroking along his pulse point. “Okay,” Chuuya says, neutral. Still, something about his tone conveys that he isn't convinced.

It has Dazai rolling his eyes. Time to distract. Time to execute the masterplan.

Pulling his wrist from Chuuya’s hold, Dazai puts his hands on either side of Chuuya’s neck and directs him backwards until his back hits the marble-tiled wall. He hisses at the impact.

Dazai laughs, hands travelling down the hill of Chuuya’s chest, spreading over his heart, the shadow of his nipples, pushing lightly, coaxing his back flat against the wall. “What are you doing?” Chuuya raises an eyebrow. He looks like he knows exactly what Dazai is doing. Like he enjoys being locked between cold walls and hot steam.

In answer, Dazai twists his fingers, observing Chuuya’s nipples turning into hard little nubs under his touch. Very intriguing.

He leans in to claim Chuuya's neck with his mouth - licks water off soft skin, hands roaming Chuuya’s abs, descending lower, lower, until Dazai can cup his dick.

It wrests a moan from Chuuya, hips jerking as Dazai kneads and strokes. Chuuya pushes into Dazai's hand, seeking friction, igniting sparks. Dazai enables all of it, twists his hand, picks up the pace; moves along with Chuuya’s messy rhythm, and with just a few flicks of his wrist, Dazai strokes Chuuya to hardness.

Something warm and wriggly, inflates Dazai's chest - something like a power trip. The pleasant type. Pride, maybe. Whatever it is, it mobilises a herd of impulses, none of which coordinated, all of which feral. One hand pulsing faster on Chuuya’s dick, the other digging into his waist, teeth biting his neck - wanting to taste his contagious pleasure.

It makes Dazai fill up too; so fast that it’s giving him a headrush.

“Fuck- yes,” Chuuya pants, approval dripping from his plush, swollen lips, glossy and wet, “your hands. You're so good at this.”

The words inflame Dazai further. His already soft knees threaten to give up, so he digs his nails harder into Chuuya’s side to keep himself upright. Regains his composure - he can’t fall

apart yet, he has plans to carry out; whimpers to draw from Chuuya's lips; praises to receive. And because they're riding high enough that a few embarrassing words seem appropriate, he tries to say something seductive. The first thing that comes to mind. "Thank you, Chu," he whispers into Chuuya's wet skin, lets the words drown; "I want to show you just how good."

There's a spot on Chuuya's neck that seems extra soft. Dazai has high hopes that it will be extra sensitive too. "I'll make it *so* good for you," he promises, glues that promise to the soft patch of skin, nips and sucks - pulls shudders from Chuuya's body.

Perfect.

Dazai thumbs at the tip of Chuuya's dick, glides down the shaft. He dips his head back to study Chuuya's face, reading every microexpression, pursuing every sign of pleasure with subtle twists of his fingers, changes in pace. He adds his free hand, cups the base of Chuuya's cock and applies a bit of pressure. Shows off all of his tricks. He picks up the pace again, rough drag, faster, faster. Climbing towards a peak, the inescapable.

A subdued moan rips from Chuuya's lips, eyes screwed shut. "So. Close,"

"Yeah? Already?"

Chuuya nods, uncoordinated, throws his head back, lips parted slightly, drawing in ragged breaths. "Yes. yes, I-"

"Ah-" Dazai stills. Loosens his grip and trails a single finger down Chuuya's dick. "not yet."

Snapping his head back to look at Dazai, there's an intensity in his eyes, desperation. "It's okay. I can go again, I-"

"No." Dazai purrs, cups Chuuya's balls, keeps his hands still, squeezes until Chuuya hisses, leans in to deliver the death sentence, pecks Chuuya's lips and whispers against them, "*not yet*."

Chuuya looks bewildered. And then, the expression shatters, slides off as his eyes turn to little slits and his mouth parts on a laugh. "I see how it is. You're making me wait for it."

Dazai nods, pleased Chuuya is so astute. "M-hmm. You're the one who said that the wait would be worth it. Remember?"

"Fuck you," Chuuya replies, uncouth vocabulary delivered on a smile that feels like a butterfly landing on Dazai's cheek.

"Such language." Dazai clicks his tongue. There's a fluttering in his chest - a somatic marker that he struggles to control. He lets it bloom, trickle through him, spill from his mouth like a laugh. "But yes, I was hoping you would."

Chapter End Notes

- The piece Chuuya plays for Dazai is Clair de Lune by Debussy. 🌓

Finishing this chapter took me *forever* because: 1. uni is killing me, and 2. I'm insecure, and it's never ever good enough, and I get stuck in editing purgatory for months.... Anyway, thank you SO much for reading <333.

I'll upload part 2 tomorrow ^^

I love kudos and comments 💖 💓 💖 💓

11. Complicated things - Part 2

Chapter Summary

le action.

Chapter Notes

Chapter notes:
This chapter contains: pure smut 💖, praise kink, a blindfold, and soft boys being very in love.

-Yōkan: a thick, jellied Japanese dessert made of red bean paste, agar, and sugar.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sheets are soft. Cold and crisp against Dazai's back.

Above him, Chuuya is boiling hot, offering kisses that turn Dazai into a melting puddle of strung out desire - kisses that he laps up with greed and hunger, and a burning wish to stay forever distracted from his cursed tendency to ruminate.

It works like a charm. He feels pinned under Chuuya's heavy attention; under the sizzling energy of his ability as *No Longer Human* consumes it, making Dazai feel alive and insane and everything else glorious.

It's a restless chase for friction as Chuuya rocks against him. Urgent. *Hard*. He breaks the kiss, but stays impossibly close, going cross-eyed as he stares down at Dazai with blown pupils. "How do you want to do this?"

Dazai licks his lips. "I already told you," he says, swallows the feelings that swirl around in his stomach like fish moving against a wild current.

"You didn't- I mean, you did... but not really." Chuuya shakes his head - forcefully enough that it ripples through his body, making him shift against Dazai's hip bone. He lets out a muted gasp, stills his head and refocuses his unfocused eyes on Dazai.

The effort is cute. Reminds Dazai of all the ways in which he wants to make Chuuya snap.

Charged with excitement, Dazai reigns-in his shaky feelings and scattered thoughts - he needs to be clever a little while longer. Bending a knee, he throws a leg over Chuuya's waist.

Understanding dawns in Chuuya's features, and he reflects back his approval of Dazai's gameplan in a slanted smile - a smile that's knowing and downright deadly the way it cuts into Dazai's chest and demands all the warmth he doesn't possess.

Dazai flexes his fingers, pushes at Chuuya's shoulder. "Ready for it?"

A ruffle of sheets, a quick movement that uses Chuuya's bodyweight as momentum, and then Dazai has them flipped. Skilled and efficient.

Stretching, Dazai sits up in one fluid motion. He makes sure to dip his head so that his hair falls over his face, curtaining his eyes enough to wrap them in mystery but not to cut off eye contact completely. Scooting back, he spreads his legs on either side of Chuuya's thighs.

"Want *you*," he says, reaching for Chuuya's dick because it's just right there - a tactile exhibition, begging for attention, hard and straining against his toned stomach.

Chuuya breathes out on a sigh, eyes falling shot as Dazai trails a finger down his dick. He dites down on his lips, hard. Flutters his eyes open again, pupils swimming in blue galaxies. "I know. We talked about that, and it's mutual," he whispers, sneaking a hand down to grasp Dazai thigh, squeezing and kneading, "but can you be a bit more specific about what you want from me?"

In place of a proper answer, Dazai starts working his hand, flicking his wrist, stroking up and down the length of Chuuya's shaft. A slow, rough, drag. Chuuya's mouth falls open on a gasp and Dazai takes a mental photograph - stores the image in his memory under the category named 'favourite things'.

"Good?" he asks, although he doesn't need to - the way Chuuya writhes is an affirmation in itself.

Dazai could do this all night. Savour the weight of arousal under his palm, thick and firm - playing Chuuya like a fiddle.

Chuuya nods, curls falling over his pinkened cheeks as he moves his head. "Very- very... good," his kiss-swollen lips part around a sigh. He looks so wonderfully debauched; blown pupils, puffed nipples, *perfect*.

Dazai lets his free hand wander over Chuuya's body, exploring curves and dips, pinching the soft skin over the hard edges of muscle. Warm. Solid. He tightens his grip around Chuuya's dick, picks up the pace, up and down, a hypnotising glide.

Chuuya closes his eyes. There's a hiss to his breath, the dry drag of Dazai's hand probably bordering on painful. Still, he bucks his hips like he wants more, looks at Dazai with bleary eyes, his mouth open around a soundless plea.

A fresh wave of arousal hits Dazai - a jolt of impulses that has him digging his nails into Chuuya's waist. He lets go to admire his handiwork; little pink half-moon marks. They will fade quickly, and that stings more than it should - He wants to leave a permanent mark; tattoo parts of himself all over Chuuya's skin.

The hand that is still stroking Chuuya's dick is tingling. He flicks his wrist on the upstroke, runs his thumbs along the head as his other hand leaves Chuuya's waist and comes to squeeze the base of his cock, tight grip, small pumps.

Chuuya hisses again. Beads of sweat have formed on his forehead.

"Too much?" Dazai asks, in the most innocent manner possible.

"No… just..." Chuuya trails off - words lost to heavy breathing.

"Hmm." A few more pumps and then Dazai deems it enough. For all Chuuya looks content, Dazai isn't one to inflict unnecessary pain. So he loosens his hold. Lets go.

Chuuya's mouth falls open on a sound that's half whimper, half groan. Relief and frustration, decorated with the gleam of saliva that slowly starts trickling down his chin. He's right where Dazai wants him - and *that* - Dazai has to reward. He dips forward and shushes Chuuya with his lips. "Let me clean this up," he whispers, trying to sound soft even as everything inside him roars like nuclear fire.

Licking the edges of Chuuya's lips, he tilts his head to turn whatever it is he's doing into a proper kiss, sweeping his tongue into Chuuya's mouth.

Chuuya bucks his hips and it sends Dazai forward, deepening the kiss, Chuuya licking into his mouth, smouldering and surprisingly tender. A hand tangles in Dazai's hair, keeping him close as their hips move together, grinding, sparkling, hardness against hardness. Excitement sloshes inside Dazai, bubbling from his lips like whimpers that Chuuya drinks from his mouth.

There's something hot and insistent about the way Chuuya stirs, feverishly chaotic like he has lost his coordination - and that has to be a lie because Chuuya is made of equal doses of grace and agility. Still, he throws his arms around Dazai in such a reckless, intense way. Like he doesn't quite know what he's doing. Dazai doesn't care; he'll take everything, *anything*, Chuuya is willing to give him

Dazai sinks down, kisses Chuuya's neck, sucks and bites like the desperate little thing he is. His eyes have somehow fallen half-closed, so he hears it more than sees it when Chuuya reaches for something on the nightstand - rummages around, throws something on the bed that lands with a muted thump. It's out of Dazai's range of sensory perception, but he's fairly sure it's lube.

"Mmm. Good call," Dazai brands his approval into Chuuya skin with more biting kisses, "but not quite yet."

Somewhat reluctantly, Dazai stops bestowing his aggressive devotion on Chuuya's neck. It's a sacrifice he needs to make to move the plan along (he intends to get his mouth back on Chuuya very quickly, so it's all good).

Chuuya sits up. Dazai drops into his lap. Erections grinding against each other. Kindling.

Dazai can feel every point of contact with Chuuya’s burning skin and everything in him aches to consume that heat. He rolls his hips and drops his head to sink his teeth into Chuuya's shoulder, muffling the gasps that spill from his mouth.

“What comes first, angel?” Chuuya asks, and then there’s a hand in Dazai’s hair, tilting his head back, stroking, wringing locks around fingers. Chuuya is so much. So shameless.

Well, Dazai can be shameless too. “First, I want to taste you.” He keeps his eyes locked on Chuuya as he moves back. Sits back on his heels and bends at the waist. Licking his lips, he opens his mouth, inches closer, drawn in by heat and magnetism and an invisible chain around his feeble little heart. He feels Chuuya’s eyes, roaming over his skin, soft like velvet. So undeservedly gentle that it can only spur Dazai on.

Diving in, tongue first, he sucks on the head of Chuuya's cock, his mouth wobbling around the senseless need to please. He wants to pull every single humanly-possible variation on pleasure out of Chuuya. He flattens his tongue against the tip, sinks his lips around it, lowers down with control, slick and slow.

He closes his eyes, to wrung out with the sensation of *touch* to deal with vision. He swallows around Chuuya’s cock. Digs his nails into Chuuya’s thighs as he starts bobbing his head. Sucking, licking.

Chuuya tastes perfect on his tongue, an indescribable flavour, heady and addictive.

“You’re so good at this.” Chuuya pants, lacing his fingers into Dazai’s hair, “have I told you?”

Dazai hums, mouth full. The vibration of his vocal cords makes his throat tighten around Chuuya dick.

Chuuya moans. Twists his fingers, nails scraping Dazai’s skull, inflaming thousands of nerves.

Dazai bops his head, takes Chuuya as deep as he can in one swallow and then slides his mouth back off. “Yes,” he says, noting that his voice comes out a little raspy. It sounds odd to his own ears, but he likes the way it scratches his throat. “Tell me again.”

“*So good for me*. The best I’ve ever had,” Chuuya whispers, his voice affected too, wobbly and sugary. It makes Dazai feel all sorts of impossible things; sparkly, light. He wants to externalise it - to lay it back onto Chuuya in whatever way he can. Kind or coercive.

So When Chuuya lets a hand fall to Dazai's chest, stroking sleekly across a nipple and smiling like he's sold, Dazai takes that as explicit permission. He bats the hand away and lowers down - wraps his mouth around Chuuya's dick again. Gives it everything he has, turns his hunger into reverence, lips kissing the tip. Widening. Sinking. He breathes through his nose, rests his hands on Chuuya’s thighs for stability. His head feels pleasantly slushy, stuffed with cotton and galaxies as he descends with control, gag reflex turned off. He lowers until he can feel Chuuya's cock hit the back of his throat, pulsing between his lips - small little currents that break all of Dazai’s restraints.

He starts moving his head in a steady rhythm; jaw relaxed, cheeks hollowed, spit dribbling.

Chuuya shifts, back hitting the sheets as he inclines, plunging into the mattress, hands still in Dazai's hair, tugging, caressing.

Dazai moans softly around Chuuya's cock, angling his head to run his tongue along the underside. Nerves touching nerves, raw and exposed like shredded power lines writhing and sizzling with danger.

"Yes," Chuuya loses another sigh, "you're absolutely perfect. I'm so close."

Dazai looks up through his lashes. Slowly slides off Chuuya's dick. "No," he says, pinching Chuuya's hip for emphasis.

"Why?" Chuuya's voice is neutral - if a bit shaky.

Dazai clears his throat, repeats the terms he has set for this exchange, "not yet."

Chuuya stares back with the most wonderful expression, anti-climax written as confusion in his face. "Still making me wait?"

"Yes."

Chuuya throws his head back, chest moving up and down in tidal loops. He lifts a hand and runs it through his hair, eyes fixed on the ceiling. "What are you waiting for? What do you want from me?"

Dazai licks his lips. He wants a lot of things. Doesn't say that.

Dazai slinks forward, flattens himself against Chuuya until they're face-to-face. "It's very complicated," he whispers, ghosting his breath over Chuuya's cheek - watches as his pulse jumps in his throat. "I couldn't explain if I wanted to."

It's the truest explanation Dazai can offer.

Well, technically, he could also say that he's waiting For Chuuya to take whatever *he* wants - for him to offer his sincerity in softness so sweet that it stings and leaves scars. Dazai wants to keep whatever it is they're doing forever - and he wants it to be given to him in a language he understands.

That's not something he knows how to say though, so instead of bringing up his nameless desires, he parts his mouth around a puff of hot air. Looks at Chuuya through the curtain of his bangs.

And then he grinds down, pressing their erections together.

It has a very desirable effect. Chuuya gasps, openmouthed and desperate. There's a pretty strain to his jaw and an even prettier pink-glow to his face. The orbit of his dilated pupils widen impossibly, soaking up his irises like a black hole - soaks up Dazai.

Chuuya’s hands are suddenly on Dazai’s jaw, stroking with dreamlike fuzziness. The touch sends a buzz of vibration through Dazai’s skull, and he feels electrified. He gazes into Chuuya's eyes, sees his own feelings reflected, intensified; Chuuya is stretched tight - about to snap.

But there’s something else in his eyes - something sharp.

“You know what?" Chuuya says, smile stretching into an infectious grin, "I think I figured you out, you fucking cryptic.”

Dazai is intrigued. He has a good inkling where this is going (which is exactly where he intended for it to go). Still, he feels anticipation surging through him, injecting fresh dopamine into his veins like the turn of events is entirely unexpected. “What exactly is it you have figured out?”

“You’re really emotionally caged. You know that right?”

Dazai narrows his eyes, “why are you answering a question with a question?” he asks, light and melodious - which Chuuya ought to read as foreboding.

Chuuya continues like Dazai’s tone doesn’t scare him at all. “Is it ’cause you're too much of a control freak?”

An interesting remark. Rather indelicate. Rather insightful.

Dazai plays along, ponders as he continues the little swivels of his hips. “I wouldn’t describe myself as controlling.”

Chuuya’s hands settle on the curve of Dazai’s back, guiding him closer as they rock against each other. “How would you describe yourself, then?”

Dazai resents the question. He huffs and stills the rocking of his body. Turns his head and looks at the curtains, drops his gaze and looks at the lamp on the nightstand - looks everywhere but Chuuya’s eyes.

“Oi, I don’t mean it as a bad thing,” Chuuya says, tapping his unfairly warm fingers against the curve of Dazai's back. He raises his hips, bending his knees until Dazai falls forward; bodies colliding. Dazai gasps, and picks up where he left; moves - grinds uncoordinatedly against Chuuya.

Chuuya smacks a kiss on Dazai's cheek. Wet and just as uncoordinated. “I was just thinking… it must be tiring to always have to be so on top of shit. It seems like you always know what’s going to happen.”

“Maybe I do.”

“You aren’t a psychic.”

“No?" Dazai grinds down again, wraps his arms around Chuuya's neck for balance, "I did read your mind back in the park, didn’t I?”

Chuuya's face flushes, the pink colour that sits high on his cheekbones intensifies, sweet like ripe peaches. He shakes his head - shakes the light befuddlement off (even if the colour remains as a cloud of light dust on his cheeks). "You plan everything out," he says, eyes boring into Dazai, sweet poison. "You manipulate reality until everything falls into place, the way you imagined it would. You always have a finger on the wheel."

And just like that Dazai realises that Chuuya is the one with psychic abilities. He sees much more than most people see.

"That's the dramatized version of it, yes," Dazai says, letting that lightness creep into his tone again. Keeping it bright, mischievous, "I can admit that it gets a bit tiring sometimes."

"Come here," Chuuya says, two simple words that are spoken like a melody - like Dazai isn't already pressed flush against his chest.

He throws both arms around Dazai in a tight hug. Bodies no longer moving - just existing next to each other.

Dazai goes very, very still. The hug feels like something that's supposed to feel wrong - a tenderness so delicate it should be forbidden. He likes it.

A little sigh drops from Dazai's mouth, low but still too loud, harmonising with his pulse, which plays like white noise in his ears. He suppresses the trembling in his core. The weak fear happiness, he knows that all too well, but he refuses to let weakness get in the way of what he wants when it's within grasping range.

He wants Chuuya to snap, Chuuya wants them to snap together. It works out perfectly because Dazai is willing to completely break himself; he *wants* to fall apart. Smash, crash and then bind his broken edges up with Chuuya's.

Losing control isn't good, but willingly giving it up is delicious. It teeters a fine line between paralysis and liberation, and he wants to walk that line - even if he suspects that he'll do it clumsily and nearly fall off.

"Why don't you blindfold me?" Dazai asks, playful - but also dead serious.

Chuuya stirs, warm and steady against Dazai. "Is that what you want?"

Dazai nods.

"Tell me," Chuuya whispers. The evening's endless reprise.

Dazai is tempted to give a non-answer, but then… "Do it," he says, voice no longer playful, but cutting - to the point.

The reaction is instant. Chuuya's features settle into a delighted smile. He jumps off the bed, footsteps patting across the floor until he stands in front of Dazai's travel bag. He rummages around with little respect for Dazai's bag-organisation (not that Dazai's bag is organised, but still). "Here's our winner," Chuuya cheers and holds up a black-tie like it's a medal.

Dazai stretches his neck, observes Chuuya as he walks back to the bed with the tie in hand and moonlight draping around him. A glowing shadow.

Dazai flutters his eyes closed, tilts his chin up in invitation.

Chuuya clears his throat, awkward. “Do you want to put it on yourself?”

Dazai blinks his eyes open again, focus shifting between the question he finds in Chuuya’s face and the tie that he’s holding out like an offering.

Dazai shakes his head, just a little miffed that he has to spell it out when he has expressed his desires so clearly through body language. “You do it.”

Chuuya binds the tie around Dazai’s head, the knot tight enough to hold but still loose enough for Dazai to slide it off should he wish to.

Unsurprisingly, the world is very dark behind the blindfold. Comfortably faded and mysterious.

“Is that okay?” Chuuya asks. Dazai nods in the direction Chuuya’s voice seems to be coming from, realising just how much he usually relies on vision, and just how confused he is about his position in space. Interesting.

Chuuya’s voice cuts through the darkness. “On your stomach?” he asks, neutral - like it isn't a leading question.

“Sure.” Dazai flaps around. He doesn’t feel very graceful, but he does feel alive, consumed by darkness and nerves. He bends his elbows and rests his chin on his folded hands.

A tremor of tenderness runs through him, and Chuuya only inflames it when his hands run along Dazai’s sides, spreading the simple happiness of warmth and goosebumps. Sliding further, following the curve down to the swell of his ass.

“You’re so gorgeous.” Chuuya mouths softly into Dazai’s skin, words turning into kisses. Dazai feels the trail of Chuuya’s lips fall along the length of his back all the way to the base of his spine. He arches into it, still not entirely aware of the whereabouts of his body but with a slight suspicion that he might be wiggling his ass very near Chuuya’s face, which… might be considered bad mannered?

Worries evaporate as Chuuya squeezes his ass, thumbing gentle circles into it, hefting it a little, almost like he’s testing the weight. It’s so ridiculous. Dazai muffles a laugh into his hands.

“Perfect,” Chuuya says matter of factly, “I’m going to touch you.”

“I was counting on it.”

Chuuya snorts and the sound mixes with the sound of a bottle being uncapped.

Dazai shudders. Tries to relax his tense muscles. He's ready.

Despite the warning and the mental preparation, the shock of cold, sticky liquid dripping onto his tailbone startles an automatic response up through his spine. Chill and sharp, moving along wired nerves and sinking into his brainstem; a constant hum of *want, want, want*. It quiets somewhat when Chuuya's warm hands add to the mix; one grabbing Dazai's waist, the other spreading the lube, a single finger fluttering over his rim.

Dazai is grateful for the blindfold. It keeps him from looking back and checking Chuuya's face for tells: How he feels, how Dazai is supposed to feel.

A finger presses up against Dazai's entrance. Slides in.

Dazai focuses all of his attention on the sensation, the gentle glide that opens him up little by little. It's warm, and it only gets warmer when he feels a thumb rubbing over his opening.

It's maddening, too much and too little at the same time. He can feel himself pulsing, shaking against the silk sheets; senses heightened and alert. His skin, tender like it's covered in third-degree burns. The smell of arousal, scorching his nose. The lingering taste of Chuuya on his tongue, so sweet.

Chuuya pokes his finger experimentally, and it feels unrealistically wonderful - breaks Dazai's composure with so little effort.

Dazai stretches his arms. Searches in the dark for… something. Soft silk and fluff make contact with his fingertips. A pillow. He grabs it and plunges his face into it.

"Okay?" Chuuya asks as he pokes and twists his finger. It's gorgeous, filling Dazai with giddy delight. It's also frustrating; so far from being enough.

Dazai nods his head into the pillow, wheedles for more as dignifiedly as he can - with a small swivel of his hips.

Chuuya complies. A second finger joins the first, stretching Dazai open, scissoring, slow and deliberate.

Chuuya is being gentle - of course, he is - it's annoying but also... good... definitely edging the line of being uncomfortable in how careful it is, but Dazai likes it nonetheless; likes it because of it. He can feel every knuckle, every torturously slow drag brushing against the pleasant stretch. No one has ever touched him with that kind of gentle intensity before. It feels special.

Chuuya bends his fingers, and it sends a sudden jerk through Dazai. Again, he feels a thumb pressing against his rim, holding him open where Chuuya's fingers move in and out with slick precision, hitting all the spots that Dazai still can't even believe that he has.

What to do with all that sensation? All those feelings?

Dazai leans into it, heavy, light, everything. He catalogues the feel of Chuuya's fingers against his skin, always something new to notice. The way all of Chuuya's touches are intuitive, yet deliberate and meticulous; he moves his body with the same kind of

methodology that Dazai would use to disarm an alarm system. And it works; Dazai feels disarmed too.

“*Chuuya*,” he sighs, mouth trembling with all the embarrassing whimpers and pleas he’s holding back.

Something soft touches his inner thigh, And Dazai hums into the pillow to show his endless approval. He recognises the feather-light pressure against his skin as Chuuya’s lips. The kisses turn from little ghosts of touch into wet and hungry kisses, Chuuya’s teeth sinking into Dazai’s skin, nipping, teasing.

Dazai trembles. If the information his nerve endings are sending to his brain is anything to go by, Chuuya is sucking hard enough to leave bruises. Dazai hopes so. He will press his cold little fingers into those bruises for days to come.

“Chuuya,” he repeats, and decides to stop holding back, “*please*.”

“Tell me what you want. I’ll give it to you.” Chuuya’s voice chimes with emotions that wash over Dazai, making him feel things he doesn't understand.

“Want..” Dazai sighs into the pillow, unspoken desires muffled by silk.

Chuuya must understand though - because Dazai feels a third finger pressing against his entrance, sinking in slow. The stretch borders on painful, but for every step it nears that line of pain, it offers double the pleasure.

The rhythm is steady, as Chuuya pushes in and out with long deep strokes. Withdrawing slowly, right until the emptiness feels excruciating, pushes back, glides along a billion nerves that have Dazai gripping the sheets and writhing as every jab to his prostate adds oil to the fire in his belly.

Once again, Dazai is grateful for the blindfold. It keeps his face from falling completely. Keeps the wetness of overwhelm, which has gathered at the side of his eyes to show just how easy he is for Chuuya.

“You’re doing so well", Chuuya praises, barely more than a whisper. Then repeats for the second time that evening, "just relax."

Dazai turns his head to give Chuuya a look. The blindfold is in the way, but Dazai can make threatening eye contact without even using his eyes. “I *am* relaxed,” he declares, tries to keep his wobbly upper lip stiff.

“Okay, okay. If you say so, angel,” Chuuya says, breathing against Dazai’s thigh, little puffs that feel like solid touches. He pokes and twists his fingers, and heat pools in Dazai’s stomach - overflows; so warm he can’t stay still. Dazai arches his back, breath rushing out of his lungs shaky and fast, a wind turbine in his hollow body.

"Look at you,” Chuuya murmurs, low and silvery like it’s a very special secret, “so pretty." He speeds up the pumping of his fingers, hits the right spot with every poke. Dazai’s vision

whites out for a second and then splits into a prison behind his closed lids, colours spinning.

“Please,” he repeats, hoping it’s the right thing to say. The magic word. He feels desperate, damp hair clinging to his forehead, face hot like he's running a fever.

He tries to grind down on Chuuya’s fingers, and as he moves his hips, he feels Chuuya’s hand on his waist, rubbing gentle circles.

“Do you think you’re ready?” Chuuya asks. He sounds far away and close at the same time, dreamy.

Dazai nods into the pillow, silk rustling beneath him. He turns his head, too aware of the slight wetness at the corners of his mouth. He swallows hard, tries to control his breathing. “*Yes*.”

Chuuya helps guide Dazai around so he’s flat on his back. Dazai sways with it, spreads and stretches.

Sinking into the sheets, he doesn’t dare to think about what he looks like. The position is compromising, and the blindfold prevents him from reading the details of the situation. For some bizarre reason, *that* makes his dick twitch, smearing a bit of sticky wetness across his stomach.

Cool air settles on top of him. He can’t see - can’t hear anything above the noise of his frantic heartbeat, which he doesn't have the mental clarity to control. “Chuuya?”

“I’m right here.” Chuuya’s hands settle on Dazai's waist again.

There’s a series of indistinct sounds; rubbing, tearing, scratching - whatever on earth Chuuya is doing.

Dazai is above whining, but he *is* getting impatient. He’s about to let out something snide, but then - at long last - Chuuya climbs on top of him, grinding down, erections rubbing together. Glorious, but not where Dazai needs him.

“Said I’m ready." Dazai bucks his hips as encouragement and echoes Chuuya's earlier question; "what are you waiting for?”

“Just wanted to tell you that you look amazing like this,” Chuuya answers, words pretty as propaganda but delivered as a truth. He nips at Dazai’s earlobe, tongue dragging lightly along the shell of his ear.

Melting further into the sheets, gooey and content, Dazai breathes heavily. “I would return the compliment but… you know,” he gestures vaguely at the blindfold, hand flailing around, probably not even pointing in the right direction, “don’t actually know what you look like right now.”

Chuuya laughs. So close that Dazai’s hair sweeps against his forehead with it. And then he feels Chuuya’s hand against his own, fingers interlacing, stretching above Dazai’s head. Without being told to, Dazai moves his other hand above his head too, crosses his wrists. He

feels Chuuya press down fully; his warm, naked body like a weighted blanket, his mouth greedy and hungry until they're both breathless. And then - a hand around Dazai's neck, *casual*, the softest of touches, a hummingbird landing on a leaf. Dazai shivers.

“Now, we’re ready,” Chuuya says, sounding awfully self-satisfied, the feather-light touch of his fingers tracing down Dazai’s chest, stroking along scars like a painter's brush, over each rib until a hand cups Dazai's hip.

And then finally, *finally* Chuuya pushes into Dazai - pushes out Dazai’s breath in the same movement, leaving him empty of oxygen but full in all other ways. Writhing. Panting.

Dazai can feel it all - Chuuya, pulsing inside him, pressed hip-to-hip. Maddening, the way he doesn’t *move*.

To swamped with desperation to spare a second thought for suaveness, he hooks his legs around Chuuya’s waist. Circles his hips. Ignites fires and sets the world into motion. He can feel Chuuya’s hands mapping his body as the flow builds. Still slow; smooth like rocking waves, Chuuya pushing into him, long and deep thrusts that send Dazai into the mattress, sinking deeper and deeper.

Dazai is vaguely aware of his mouth hanging. He closes it again, swallows down the wave of undifferentiated feelings that want to spill from his eyes and mouth as tears and pleas. Frantic for more, he rocks his hips faster, tries to spur Chuuya on.

Chuuya pushes in deep. Grabs Dazai’s inner thigh, pushing gently until Dazai’s knee folds, brushing the side of his waist.

Dazai is momentarily stunned by the heat of his own skin. Everything is dark and confusing and delightful. Chuuya thrusts again, bottoms out, the new angle exquisite, hitting the spot inside Dazai that has him falling through a billion universes - has him panting and heaving and pulling Chuuya’s name apart. “Chuuuu-ya,” he lets out on a quiet sigh, dissolving in his mouth, sweet and sticky like yokan.

Chuuya grinds his hips, slow, deliberate. Peppers kisses across Dazai’s skin with every rock of his body. Bites and licks and pushes deeper. The pleasure mounts from the base of Dazai’s spine, a hot fizz that climbs upwards. The stretch of his hole, tender and oversensitive from the pleasure of Chuuya’s dick driving into him, the friction as they glide against each other. It’s intoxicating - Dazai’s cock trapped between their bodies, dragging against burning skin, wet and blessed with the pressure of Chuuya’s abs. He feels utterly shattered; ripped open and bleeding his little heart all over himself and Chuuya.

Then Dazai realises; they’re... making... love. The realisation churns heavy in his gut, twists his organs to the point of nausea - and then lets go, a calm euphoria washing over him.

He feels so full and alive and present; oversensitized and racing towards the edge, blood rushing in his ears, white noise coming down on him in an endless crescendo. He’s being torn apart and put together with every thrust, and he needs more-more-more.

Chuuya grabs the inside his knee again, bending it until Dazai's back arches, changing the angle. Somehow, impossibly, it’s better, deeper.

Dazai’s mouth falls open, head thrown back.

“Chu-,” he sods, quiet, ruined.

“I got you.” Chuuya answers and wastes no time delivering on that promise - Dazai feels hands slide down his back, pulling him into a deeper arch. He has lost his connection with his proprioception, and with the lack of visual input he really can’t know what kind of position his body is in, but it feels a lot like he’s soaring, weightless, only grounded by Chuuya’s presence.

“You… ah." Chuuya pants, into Dazai's shoulder, "feel- so... so good.” It's a garbled mess that Dazai can hardly make sense of, but the passionate tone wraps around him like a soft cocoon.

He hums, not trusting his mouth to shape around words. If it sounds like a whimper when it drops from his mouth, he can’t care.

A hot, white fire wraps around the back of his neck - Chuuya's hands - pulling him closer to claim his lips. Dazai melts into it, licks into Chuuya's mouth.

“So good,” Chuuya sighs into Dazai’s mouth. “The --” his breath catches, “the best. Always, always.”

Dazai grits his teeth against a strangled moan. He can't seem to take a full breath, drowning in pleasure, Chuuya’s praises wrapping around him - an anchor that drags him deeper and deeper.

Lowering an arm from over his head, he waves his hand around until he finds what he’s looking for. Chuuya’s face. He flattens his palm against Chuuya’s cheek, pressing a thumb into his mouth. Chuuya licks on it.

Heat boils in Dazai’s stomach, molten and mysterious. lava bubbling inside him. He’s out of his mind with need, hips snapping up to meet Chuuya’s, frantic to chase a shared climax. *Always*.

His legs convulse, one thigh clutching Chuuya’s waist, the other falls to the side. A hard sharp spike of lust shoots into the throb of his cock, pulsing, desperate. So high on desire, his reality is pulled apart into little strings of fractured meaning. He can’t shake how good it feels. To be desired, to be devoured.

So close. He’s so, so close.

It’s a perfect feeling. Dazai only wishes to hold onto it forever, to wreath his spiky claws into it and demand that it stay inside him, fill him up and never-ever leave.

With a drawn-out moan, Chuuya’s hips stutter up into the heat of Dazai’s body, and he topples over the edge, spilling inside Dazai, shaking, convulsing.

Dazai follows right after, plunging into an endless freefall, dick pulsing between them. Ripples of pleasure sear through him in long waves, seemingly endless, hitting him with new heights, again and again - and he lets himself fall apart. Finally. Oblivion washes over him, wrecked body going limp.

Very distantly, he's aware of how Chuuya's hips keep stuttering, riding out the high as he smooches words into Dazai's panting mouth, "you-- hng- everything."

What? Words float around Dazai's brain without linking up to a semantic network.

…

No, it doesn't make sense

...

And then the words catch up: Everything, everything, everything. *You're everything* - whatever that means? It's hardly an accurate representation of affairs, but Dazai makes the executive decision to accept it as a truth.

Pins and needles start prickling in Dazai's arms as his senses come back online. Battling the tiredness that tells him not to lift them yet, he finds the little knot that's tied around the back of his head. Unties it and lets the blindfold - the regular old tie - glide off, throwing it unceremoniously on the floor.

Next to him, Chuuya is still stirring; practically vibrating. It's cute. Dazai has nothing to say to any of it, but he has layers and layers of nonverbal appreciation that he wants to spread across Chuuya's body and then lick off like chocolate.

He turns to his side, mobilises every single ounce of courage he possesses, and wraps his arms around Chuuya's waist.

He really truly doesn't know how to hold someone. It feels strange. Eerie. Still, it feels good - too good to deny himself of.

The pale moonlight stretches into the room, folds around them. Comforting in its simple beauty.

It's easy to drift off, to forget to feel vulnerable about the intimacy of it all and just... relax; forget about the mess they've made, sticky, and objectively gross, and in desperate need of a change of sheets.

Dazai doesn't care. Messy is good. Messy is charming.

He runs a finger along Chuuya's cheek, and Chuuya presses into it, mouth opening on a little snore. He's in the early stages of sleep already, still responsive to touch, but brain lulled deep enough into alpha-waves that he's not entirely mentally present.

A good time to whisper a secret to him then; he will hear it, he will process it - but he won't remember.

Dazai hovers his lips right next to Chuuya's ear, whispers, "I'm not sure what it means… but you're everything too."

The absurdity of the statement makes Dazai fall apart, press closer and bury his face in Chuuya's hair as he smiles into it. Everything? Infinite sets don't really come in pairs, do they? Still, he laces his hand with Chuuya's, their arms curling like infinity symbols.

He lets out a long exhale, eyes falling shut. Maybe it doesn't have to be complicated.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading <3333

I can't even begin to explain how much I appreciate you - yes, *you* reading this right now - for sticking with this long and rambly story. My heart is overflowing. Thank you so much 💖

Comments and kudos are always appreciated <333

12. Embroidery

Chapter Summary

Embroidery, blood types and other romantic things.

Chapter Notes

Hello beautiful friends,

I hope you're all doing well. Thank you so much for all the comments and kudos on the last chapter. I'm just overflowing with love and appreciation. ♡♡♡♡♡♡

Here comes 6k of hurt/comfort and fluff (and a glaring lack of structured grammar. I'm so sorry)

Chapter warnings:

- Nighttime is anxiety hours for Dazai, and his anxious spiral is described in some detail.
- Self-harm thoughts: Dazai briefly considers self-harm but he doesn't act on those thoughts.

Despite the warnings, this is actually very soft.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It doesn't have to be complicated, but lo and behold, Dazai will *make* things complicated.

It's not something he does on purpose. Rather, it's a multi-layered, tragic flaw in his being. The first layer of misfortune being his dumb perpetual-motion machine of a brain and its everlasting aversion to sleep. Sleep is something that evades Dazai even on a good night, but when he has problems to solve and things to overthink - well, then there's absolutely no hope of him getting quality sleep.

He sighs. Deep, muted.

You're everything. Chuuya's sexed-out statement haunts Dazai, the seemingly meaningless blabber plays on an endless loop, fraying the insides of his head as he puts the words through every single code-breaking algorithm he has memorised. What does it mean?

He looks over at Chuuya, the real sleeping beauty. He seems to be far gone into slow brainwaves: breath deep with a slight rasp on every inhale, legs sprawled and taking up more

than half the massive bed, a bit of drool trickling from the corner of his mouth. Very, very admirable - the way he exists so effortlessly.

Dazai could never exist like that, and that realisation has yearning and a bit of entirely unwelcome jealousy rising in his stomach; sloshing around like foaming tides.

He reaches out a hand, runs it through Chuuya's hair, almost dry now, velvety and real under Dazai's touch. He sort of wants to twist his fingers around a lock of hair and yank. Wants to elicit reactions from Chuuya all the time - *needs* it - needs to use people as mirrors whose reflection will tell him how to act, feel, be. Left on his own without the heat and solid containers others provide him, he kind of just... disintegrates.

Thermodynamics really do him in. Pretty pathetic.

"I should just let you sleep, shouldn't I?" he whispers. Drops his hand. Drops his gaze. It feels creeping and invasive to stare at someone who is asleep. Instead, he rolls on his back, looks up at the patches of streetlights that slither in through the window. Watches them dance across the ceiling.

Still too bright. Even at night. Everything is always too much.

He sighs again, itching to redirect his twitchiness into action. So he glides out of the bed, avoiding looking at the digital clock on the nightstand. He doesn't want to know what time it is. The way hazy darkness stretches around him tells him all he needs to know. It's late, and it's no doubt the time of night where stupid insecurities start writhing around in his head. Loud and incessant.

He tiptoes across the floor, pulls out the least sensorily offensive clothes he can find from his travel bag and gets dressed. Quiet, efficient - sliding silky, blue socks on to finish the ritual.

Looking around the room for something belonging to Chuuya, his eyes land on the hideous purple sweater. It's thrown unceremoniously over a pompous chair. It looks a little confused and out of place. Or maybe, *possibly*, Dazai is just projecting. He shakes his head. Shakes off the thought. It doesn't matter - he can't dedicate energy to speculating about how an inanimate object might feel about its existence.

He walks up to the chair and grabs the sweater. Scrunching his nose, he assesses it and decides that the purple fabric is even more frightful up close. Washed-out and worn. "Oh, dear. You really do have terrible taste, chérie," he murmurs as he turns to shoot Chuuya's sleeping form a judgemental look.

Chuuya snores in reply.

Dazai continues on socked feet, the thin layer of fabric dampening the sound of his footsteps as he patters across the floor, continuing into the bathroom where his suit jacket still lies on the damp floor. He picks it up, fishes the precious little tin case out of the inner pocket and proceeds into the lounge to find a good place to sit and stew in his spinning thoughts.

There’s an inviting spot on the floor by the glass balcony door. He plops down, crosses his legs. Lets his eyes rest upon the city; small beneath him and relatively quiet (although still twinkling with never-sleeping neon signs). The moon is high in the sky, slightly blurred out just like the few stars that he can spot above the sheer blanket of pollution.

It's a delightful scenery. Delightful in a way that feels like melancholia; slicing into Dazai's chest with every beam of light that stretches his way.

The image burns Dazai's eyes, wetness forming at the corners. He glances down at his hands, gripping the purple fabric. A sudden urge to bury his face in the sweater and inhale Chuuya's lingering scent hits him right in the spot where his ability to contain himself should be. Still, he fights the impulse, bites into his lower lip instead. He doesn’t quite know if he’s doing it to reward or to punish himself, but in either case, it fails to have the desired effect; the pain it produces hardly qualifies as pain. A dull, distant pressure that amounts to little more than nothing. A familiar numbness. “Ah. Of course, that’s how I'd feel,” he says to himself, spits it out on a bitter chuckle, “colour me completely unsurprised.”

Plunging headfirst into a shutdown isn't the most sophisticated way to deal with feelings, Dazai recognises that. That doesn’t stop him from accelerating once he has already fallen into it though.

--BONK--

His head drifts forward and hits the balcony door. For effect, Dazai knocks his forehead against the thick glass again - the sound hollow, despite the way his head feels stuffed. *Bonk. Bonk. Bonk.*

He hates himself for tarnishing the sweet memories of the evening with *this;* his ridiculous antics - the stupid fear of loss that’s buried beneath piles and piles of defences but still manages to dig its way through, resurfacing when he needs it the least. The inability to soothe himself as he grasps for his own ghost and watches it dissolve in front of him. Dazai doesn't even believe in ghosts.

One last time, Dazai knocks his head against the glass. Then sits back, a light spinning in his head that does nothing to distract him from how discontent he is with his inability to hold on to the things that make him feel whole and pretty - like sweet music and whispered praises…

Fluttering his eyes closed, he tries to collect his thoughts. He recognises self-pity for what it is; an endless waking nightmare when he should be sound asleep. A tendency to fall for his own nonsense and rake himself over the ashes of his shortcomings.

It’s irksome, but it’s also something that he ought to be able to sublimate into creativity.

With forced focus, he blinks his eyes open, and the world looks a little less hazy and off-axis. It’s incredible what a sense of purpose can do to the functioning of basic processes like visual perception.

He buries his hands into the fleece of the sweater’s hood. The sweater is a crime against fashion, but it’s also soft under his cold fingertips, stirring a little feeling into his body. Just a

little.

Picking up the tin case, he holds it up in the moonlight. A little treasure chest. He shakes it, listens to the clinking sounds with great interest - like he doesn't know exactly what's in it.

The hinged lid clicks open, and he skims through the insides, searching for thread and needle - the thick one with a sharp tip and a large eye. While searching through the organised mess, his eyes fall on his old friend, the razorblade. It's clean and oh-so-eager to absolve him of some of his suffering. Dazai stares at it, unblinking. Then shakes his head. "Not tonight," he says to absolutely no one (because he doesn't talk to things, that would be bizarre).

There's a part of him that wants to accept the razor's promise of injurious comfort, but he ignores it in favour of the part of him that wants to stay on task - finish the quest he has set for himself: Creativity. Embroidery.

He puts the little tin aside, leaves it open in case he needs more supplies, threads the needle with thick orange silk-thread and a mostly steady hand. Spools of white, red and black thread lie ready by his side - because the design he's going to attempt will get fancy and intricate (as things do when he is in one of his pensive moods).

"I'll make you a koi fish. Wouldn't you like one of those, Chuuya?" Dazai asks the sweater, the words out of his mouth before he remembers that he doesn't talk to things. But since he has already started, he continues, "I'm going to embroider a cute little one right-" he flattens a hand against the sweater's front, "*here*. Right above your heart. Isn't that lovely?"

The needle sinks into the thick fabric. Disappears in purple softness. Reappears when he pulls it back through. Very satisfying.

He just hopes that stitching his desperation into Chuuya's belongings counts as flirting, or something along those lines, and not as overstepping boundaries - not as him inflicting his unstable self upon Chuuya.

Dazai bites his lip again, enforces his wavering attention with violence. To his great delight, it works. The pain registers. A little dulled but definitely there, supporting his focus as he moves the needle, up and down, through and through.

It feels good - channelling the restlessness into something. He likes doing things with his hands; likes seeing the little koi fish come into embroidered existence. Orange, white, black, red...

...

... And yeah, he likes doing things with his hands, but his grip on the needle is starting to sting against the tips of his fingers.

It probably means he should take a break, but he ignores the signal from his pain receptors. Keeps going.

And because he's awful, he doesn't stop once the last stitch has been added to the fish. No, driven by a remarkable lack of inhibition, he turns a sleeve inside out and continues; embroiders his thoughts in cursive letters onto the inner side of the cuff: *please stay a little longer.*

He studies his horror-piece; the elegant stitches colliding with the inelegant message. Arguably not his brightest move to lay all his feelings on a piece of clothing like that. "Oof. Yikes," he breathes out, almost startling himself with the quietly spoken interjection.

Asking Chuuya to stay around is probably too much. And yet, he selfishly wishes to put the little flicker of mutual-attraction (or whatever this glowy thing that Chuuya has lit in his chest is) into a jar. To keep it forever.

He turns the sweater sleeve back around so it's no longer inside out. Hides his request, because what else is he supposed to do with that kind of shameless longing?

A pack of cigarettes falls out from one of the pockets as Dazai rearranges the sweater in his lap. He chooses to interpret it as a sign. So with deft fingers, he opens the pack and finds a lighter squeezed-in next to the cigarettes. Another sign.

He lights up. Opens the door to the balcony to allow the smoke to escape. The wind glides curiously into the glamorous suite, curling around him, caressing his body.

He doesn't smoke. Not usually. Still, he brings the rolled-up paper to his lips, sucks in the toxins, watches the ember alight, breathes out grey spirals that tickle his nostrils.

Inhale. The taste of tobacco mixes with his dumb gloominess. Exhale. The smoke rises like a thin wall in front of him.

His head falls to rest on his shoulder, and the world tilts. He gazes out over the city, the inorganic shapes of high-rise buildings, the smell of burned rubber and exhaust fumes, the too-bright neon lights that splatter colours across the thin sheen of clouds.

It's way too much, but it's also very pretty in its own way.

"Dazai?" Chuuya's voice carries through the static of Dazai's thoughts.

Dazai turns his head. Sees Chuuya wrapped in a duvet, looking adorably sleep-ruffled. "Hey," Dazai says, aiming for casual, but it comes out a little flat. He stretches his arm and taps the cigarette, ash falling to the balcony's marble floor. It looks sort of poetic.

"What's up?" Chuuya asks, voice sleep-scratched.

Dazai shrugs.

Footsteps echo against the floor, and then Chuuya flops down next to Dazai. Shuffles closer. "Feeling secretive?" he asks, voice low.

"You know how I love secrecy. I can turn even the most common, boring thing into a magical mystery just by hiding it," Dazai replies with a forced playful lilt to his voice. A little too

late, he remembers to wink - his mask of impishness too transparent to conceal his real mood. Oops.

“M-hmmm.” Chuuya reaches an arm out from under his duvet-cocoon and steals the cigarette. Takes a drag, the smoke coiling in fractal patterns from his mouth into the ether like a kiss he blows to the moon. “Come on. Tell me.” Chuuya stares straight ahead. Maybe he knows Dazai doesn’t want eye contact right now. Maybe it’s pure intuition. Maybe he just likes to look at misty nights and neon signs.

“I’m just-” Dazai starts, unsure of how to explain himself - ends up offering an encrypted version, “having a tea party with my thoughts.”

“I see, I see.” Chuuya nods. He looks as magical and mysterious as a secret, wrapped in smoke and moonlight - like someone who understands weird, coded language. “The long dark tea-time of the soul,” he says, taking another puff of the cigarette, then adds, “are you okay?”

It feels like an easy question - one that should have an obvious answer. Still, Dazai finds himself unusually unable to apply the necessary steps of deduction to find one. “I’ll be fine,” he settles on.

Chuuya turns his head, looks at Dazai with uncomfortably discerning eyes. “Then what’s with that woeful look?” He points the cigarette in Dazai’s direction, smoke rising into Dazai’s face. Kind of rude. Dazai doesn’t really mind though. He shrugs again and flicks a wrist in a gesture that he doesn’t think communicates much at all. "You know..."

And Chuuya must know. Or at least he knows better than to pursue the line of questioning because he mirrors Dazai’s shrug and drops the topic.

His gaze flicks across the purple sweater in Dazai’s lap. “That’s very pretty.” He nods his head at the embroidered koi fish.

Dazai tightens his muscles to stop himself from shivering. “Thanks." He runs a finger over the embroidery. "You weren’t supposed to see it.”

“You thought I wouldn't notice?”

The question makes Dazai’s finger twitch. The idea that Chuuya wouldn’t notice does seem unrealistic. Then again, it’s not really about realism as much as it’s about Dazai’s double-edged wish to guard his vulnerability at the same time as he presents it in all its grotesque glory. It’s kind of stupid. “I’m glad you like it,” he says instead of saying something… well, stupid (like the *‘I was afraid you wouldn't like it’* or *‘wait till you check the inside-cuff of your ugly sweater’* that his brain tries to supply as answers). He’s many things, *including* stupid, but he refuses to let himself come across that way.

“Of course, I like it.” Chuuya slinks an arm around Dazai’s waist, slow and sneaky, almost like he thinks Dazai wouldn’t notice. And that’s at least as stupid as thinking the embroidery wouldn’t be noticeable, but Dazai doesn't call it out because he’s nice like that.

Dazai looks Chuuya up and down; studies his expression, his body language, the way he looks ethereal without even trying. Gilded and golden from the misty light of the moon, a flash of creamy skin where his legs peek out from under the duvet, his fierce elegance softened into something mellow and sweet. Dazai sort of wants to bite his neck or something like that, spoil his seeming perfection a little. Dazai also wants to confess to him. So he does. “I want to tell you what’s wrong, I just don’t know how to explain.”

“I see,” Chuuya says again. Dazai doubts that Chuuya sees much more than the tip of the iceberg of it.

“Yeah. I just...” Dazai trails off. The words that stick like glue to his tongue are way too raw to deserve externalization. Still, his sudden need to make himself understood overpowers the discomfort. “Sometimes I feel empty.”

“Ah, I know that feeling.” Chuuya tightens his hold around Dazai’s waist. Squeezes. “I’m sorry you feel that way,” he adds, rubbing little circles into the small of Dazai’s back.

And it does help somewhat. Doesn't make the emptiness go away, but anchors it to something real and stable. Just like every time they kiss - or have sex - or do anything at all that feels like *something* until it’s over and then the feeling fades like an elusive lover...

Whatever. That’s just how it is.

“It’s okay,” Dazai says leaning into Chuuya’s touch, “I knew it would make me feel this way.”

Chuuya frowns. Stops the comforting circling motion. Hand falling to his side. “Wait. What do you mean? Did I do something wrong? Was it the blindfold? Wha-”

"No need to freak out." Dazai intervenes, shushing Chuuya with a stretched finger to his lips, "you were great. Perfect."

Chuuya shakes his head, but Dazai stomps down the protest with a clarification. “It's not about what we did or didn't do. It's because I shouldn't allow myself to want things.”

Chuuya’s frown deepens. “What do you mean when you say *things,* ” he asks, raising the hand that isn’t holding the cigarette and making air quotes with his fingers.

A grand question. “When I say *things,* I mean a lot of things. Including, but not limited to the things we did earlier tonight,” Dazai says, a bit of his frustration seeping into his voice - manifesting as a scritchy rise in pitch. Embarrassing.

“Right…” Chuuya nods like he gets it, but the frown is *still* there, taking up permanent residence on his face, “and wanting things is bad because?”

“Because anything I would never want to lose is always lost.”

Chuuya tilts his head, looks at Dazai the way someone might look at a very intricate puzzle with a few missing pieces. “That sounds like a double negation.”

“It’s not. It’s *framing*," Dazai explains, although he feels like that much should be self-explanatory. Maybe it isn't. "There’s a difference between being afraid of wanting things and being afraid of losing them,” he elaborates, trying to maintain a semi-cheerful tone (because the reality of his words seems too brutal). “But the point is just that experience has taught me that everything worth wanting, will be lost the moment I obtain it.”

Chuuya opens his mouth. Closes it again. Clearly struggling for words.

Dazai would feel proud of rendering Chuuya silent, but then again, he kind of wants Chuuya to keep talking - because he has a nice voice, and he says nice things, and Dazai is simple enough to allow himself to appreciate nice things. “You have nothing to say to that, Chuuya?”

“I do. I’m just thinking about how to *frame* it.” Chuuya offers, sounding so serious and sincere that it’s almost theatrical. He lifts the cigarette and takes a long slow drag. Leans his head back and blows out smoke. “I get why it can be scary, but I still think that wanting things is good. It means you have preferences and drives - that just makes you human.”

Dazai’s brain very unhelpfully supplies that it’s exactly therein the problem lies, because he fails miserably to enact humanness. And that’s going to be hard to explain, but Dazai will try - will challenge Chuuya’s theatrics with his own brand of drama: the horrible truth. “It’s not quite like that, though. You see, I have to analyse,” he waves a hand around in an all-sweeping motion, “the *situation* to make an assessment on what this all means and what my response needs to be. And then, I have to downgrade my feelings to respond appropriately.”

“I don’t….” Chuuya starts but cuts himself off, shaking his head. “*Why?*”

Dazai purses his lips. The why-questions are always the hardest to answer. He looks through a murky brain fog for words that seem meaningful and genuine. Comes up rather short. “I suck,” he settles on, stealing back the cigarette and taking a last drag before putting it out against the balcony floor. Then adds to his statement for the sake of clarity, “I feel things disproportionately. It’s an ugly trait, but that’s how it is.”

Chuuys shakes his head again. Pulls the duvet tighter around himself. He looks a little exasperated, but he also looks like an overgrown caterpillar. “I thought I'd told you that you’re beautiful. It’s almost like you don’t listen to me.”

Dazai turns his head and laughs into Chuuya’s shoulder, a little bitter with the remnants of his repressed self-pity, but mostly genuine. “You’re right. Pure beauty has no substance. It’s always without meaning or morality. That’s its whole appeal.”

Chuuya groans, lifting his shoulder and jostling Dazai’s head in the process. “Thank you for calling me beautiful, Chuuya〜 What a sweet compliment,” he trills in a voice that Dazai assumes is supposed to sound like a caricature of his own. It’s not funny. Except it is.

Dazai pulls his face into a pouty look. “I can’t believe Chuuya would make a mockery of my existential despair. How cruel.”

“I’m just trying to distract you.”

“I know. And I like it. keep going - You’re good at it.”

“Oh,” the most delightful flush spreads over Chuuya's cheeks, always so responsive. “Uh. I guess we can just sit here and talk for awhile? If there's anything you want to talk about?” Chuuya poses the question in a way that's both fumbling and awkward, but Dazai still wants to answer it with all he has. Which is no easy task - this is the part where he has to balance bravery and caution equally. Really think about how he phrases his words. “Well...”

“Yes?” Chuuya’s voice comes out a little squeaky, breaking at the end. Kind of eager. Kind of sweet.

Sweet enough to fuel Dazai’s momentum. “When I say I feel things disproportionately,” Dazai starts, trailing a hand towards Chuuya’s crossed legs that peek out under that duvet, traces the line of his knee with a finger. Keeps his voice steady. “What I mean is just that I feel all of this to be more intimate than you intend it to be. I remember each one of your touches like a very special gift.”

Chuuya's nose scrunches and his eyes narrow. “When have I given you the impression that I don't intend for this to feel intimate?” He sounds so insulted that it startles a little laugh out of Dazai.

Chuuya bumps their shoulders together. “This *is* special. *Very* special.”

Dazai doesn’t know what to say to that, so he looks through his mind for a ready-made script to recite; picks one that seems relevant. “I’m not sure I deserv-”

“Shh.”

“But I-”

“No. Shut up, mackerel.”

Dazai huffs and crosses his arms over his chest. “But that’s how I feel and I’m allowed to feel that way.”

A perturbed look settles on Chuuya’s face. A look that Dazai finds endearing although he probably shouldn't. It's hardly surprising though, Dazai does a lot of things he shouldn't - like smoking indoors and messing with Chuuya’s wholehearted attempts at making things better.

Chuuya’s furrowed brow eases somewhat. “I hate that you’re right,” he concedes without much of a fight. Very off-brand.

And Dazai decides that he might as well dish out a bit of the same energy. Say the unexpected - reveal his strategy. “And I hate that you’re giving in so easily. Was trying to pick a fight.”

“I'll give you a fight,” Chuuya replies, his statement contradicted by his gentle tone. He elbows Dazai’s upper-arm, a light shove that probably isn’t intended to feel like much on the receiving end. But it does; it feels like *so much* - a destabilising force that knocks Dazai’s sticky dysthymia out of orbit.

And Dazai craves more of it. “Can you do that again?” he asks, feeling a little insane for being so bold.

Chuuya blinks. “Do what?”

Dazai swallows the lump in his throat that tries to stop him from expressing himself the way he wants to. “Touch me.”

Chuuya’s face slides through various expressions, slithers into something delicate that reminds Dazai of rain on a stained glass window. “Of course,” he says, sweetness clinging to his voice and his movements when he wraps an arm around Dazai once again. Tighter this time.

It’s warm and grounding, and the only thing that stops it from being perfect is the fact that Dazai can’t help but notice how Chuuya’s eyes have wandered; skittered across the floor and landed on the open tin case.

Chuuya grimaces at the razor, mouth set in a line that’s hard to read, but Dazai still begrudgingly reads it as concern. He doesn’t need Chuuya’s concern, but that’s not a thing to say when it’s offered so freely.

So he treads carefully, tries to balance the clumsy reality with poise. “I sometimes use it to distract myself.” He swallows the unwelcome hoarseness in his throat, continues, “but I wasn't even thinking about using it tonight.”

It’s not entirely true, but it’s mostly true, and Dazai will allow that to be good enough.

Chuuya’s concern fades from his features, turns into a little smile. Soft. Soft enough to sting - so Dazai lets it sting, all the while hoping the pain might do something good. That it might leave one of those lasting scars that he loves so much.

“I’m glad,” Chuuya says, hugging Dazai tighter, “if you ever need a distraction, I’m happy to provide it.”

Dazai smiles, and if it’s not entirely genuine, it’s not because he doesn’t intend for it to be but simply because he’s oddly… touched. “That’s very sweet, Chu-chu. You’re not always around, though.”

“You can always call me, though,” Chuuya shoots right back.

Interesting concept. Dazai finds himself very intrigued by the prospect of letting someone witness his breakdowns. It’s terrifying, but he likes the idea of not being alone with it. Trudging through life in a haze of loneliness and alienation does get wearying.

“Okay,” he agrees, simple and probably not enough. He lifts a hand and tucks a lock of hair behind his ear, his cold fingers steady even if he feels like everything else about his existence belies his composed exterior. His insides tremble. “You can call me whenever too.” He makes his tone melodic; tries to mirror Chuuya’s easy genuineness, “If you want.”

Chuuya leans in, whispers “I do. And I will,” before he seals the promise with a kiss. So, so airy against Dazai’s lips. Barely there before he breaks it again. Dazai chases after him, feeling an embarrassing lot like he might bleed dry if he doesn’t get to pour himself into Chuuya’s mouth.

Makes Dazai wonder… it’s a dumb thought with little to no relevance to this thing that they’re doing - this romancy thing - but it seems inevitable, with all that’s been going on. “What blood type are you?” he asks, hushed as he lifts a hand to caress Chuuya’s cheek, eyes on his lips.

“O minus,” Chuuya answers promptly, not hesitating a fraction of a second. It’s probably a reflex to respond so quickly and unquestioningly, something that’s been hammered in by emergency response training.

Dazai respects that. He nods slowly. Murmurs against Chuuya's lips. “The ultimate donor. That’s what I would have guessed too. It seems to suit your personality.”

Dazai isn't one for pseudoscience. The idea that blood type should correlate with character traits is all nonsense, he’s sure. But in a metaphoric sense, he appreciates the concept. Antibodies in many variations colliding as types mix, blending seamlessly or attacking each other as antigens bind to the foreign molecules, causing them to rupture.

He likes to think that he’s very compatible with Chuuya, so he moves in for another kiss. This time with more fervour.

He wants to bite Chuuya’s lips, draw blood.

Chuuya hums into the kiss, tangles a hand in Dazai’s hair, and keeps it there - a light pressure that has Dazai feeling like he's moments from sinking through the floor. He opens his mouth on a sigh, muffled and broken. He probably sounds like a fractured mess, and he would be embarrassed, but Chuuya doesn’t seem turned off by it at all. If anything Chuuya presses back against him with more enthusiasm; meets him halfway with matched force. A perfect move.

It’s as though Chuuya has a manual to Dazai’s brain, understanding which buttons to press to soothe the tumult, diffuse the whirling thoughts into white noise.

Dazai doesn’t know how to show his gratitude, but he will try. Again and again. He pulls back and catches his breath. Then falls into Chuuya again, Pressing a cotton-light kiss into the corner of his mouth, another one to his cheek. *Again and again.* Soft, and sweet because he’s fairly certain that Chuuya likes it that way.

A gentle breeze sweeps into the room and Dazai, being Dazai and easily swayed by everything, shivers with it. Rattled by the wind (and everything else the evening has thrown his way).

He rests a hand on Chuuya’s thigh, for balance and maybe also for other reasons (like how he likes the feeling of Chuuya’s muscles under his hand). He tips his head to glance at Chuuya.

Checks that he's doing the right thing - finds a confirmation, Chuuya's eyes glistening and making Dazai feel pretty just for being the one those eyes look at. He could live on that look.

"I think I get it," Chuuya says, so muted it's almost absorbed by the darkness.

"You do?"

"Yeah. It's the uncertainty, isn't it? Not really having a guarantee that you won't lose the things you want to keep?"

Dazai nods. That is the problem's essence - even if the essence has shapeshifting properties and comes in many variations.

A thoughtful veil falls over Chuuya's eyes - like he's lost looking inwards - looking through his head for answers. And then his eyes flash back to clarity. A smile spreads on his face and it speaks of knowing all of Dazai's secrets. It's mildly insulting - Dazai is the master of secrets. It's also intriguing.

"Wanna share your thoughts?" Dazai asks.

"Yeah. Was just thinking that… Certain things… You ought to be able to stick them in one of those big glass cases and put a label on them."

What an appealing idea. It worms its way into Dazai's brain, takes root, and spreads through his neuronal networks until it's all he can focus on. He flexes his fingers, he wants to claw them into something, but instead, he stays civilised - taps lightly against Chuuya's thigh as though he's playing the piano. A simple melody; *please stay a little longer.*

Chuuya's catches Dazai's hand. Holds it. Gently. It feels weird. It feels like it's supposed to mean something. Dazai can't fathom what it means though. "Wha-"

"I'll *show* you," Chuuya says, confident and clear like he's saying something clever - when really, it's a meaningless statement, wrapped up in a non-sequitur.

Dazai narrows his eyes at the nonsense. "Show me what, exactly?"

"Things," Chuuya answers, vague, but his tone is bold in a way that leaves no room for second guesses or tangential interpretations.

Small bubbles of laughter rise through Dazai, forming chemical reactions with the emptiness inside him; fluttering and bouncing. When it all settles again, he feels a little lighter. "Things? And here I was thinking that trying to get a bit of fun out of modern life would only lead to disappointment - but who could be disappointed when there are *things*."

Chuuya dips his head, a self-satisfied little salute. "That's me. I never disappoint."

Well, Dazai does know that to be true, and he wants to bask in the truth too - even though he knows that with the way he's racing down that path, he's sure to be found out sooner or later (maybe he kind of wants to be found out). "I wanna show you things too," he says, endlessly earnest.

Chuuya's smile blooms into something so bright it's almost blinding. He doesn't say anything, just leans in. Places a wet kiss on Dazai's lips. Buoyant, soft and sweet like pudding and promises.

Chuuya sits back. Still doesn't say anything. And the silence is loud, but it's also tender. A silence that soothes the void of the missing puzzle pieces inside Dazai; scrapes off the rough edges of his incessant neuroses and dips them in glittery varnish.

It's wonderful and sparkling and everything else Dazai could wish for. But it's also *uncertain* because silence doesn't provide answers, and Dazai will drive himself into absolute madness if he doesn't get an answer. "Chuuya?"

"Hmm?"

"Just to be clear; when we're speaking of putting a label on things."

"Yeah?"

"If we decide to continue to show each other how we feel about... things…"

"Yes?"

"What exactly does that *mean*."

"Means whatever we want it to mean. But I was hoping it meant that we're- you know." Chuuya waves a hand as though trying to grab the word he's looking for in the darkness of the night - or as though Dazai is simply supposed to materialise that word for himself.

Dazai scoffs. "No. I don't know." It's not entirely true. He *does* know. In fact, he considers it his existential burden to *know* things. Unfortunately, that doesn't always translate well into knowing how to *feel* about things.

Not for the first time, he wonders what prize he's trading for intellectual insight. It's all very confusing. "I need you to explain it to me."

"So much for being a genius, huh? Can't read between the lines," Chuuya teases, but his voice is a little unsteady. Nervous. "I hope it means that we're together."

Feelings Dazai can't identify flutter and dance like flames inside him, zapping his brain with the crackling sound of a high voltage live wire until only the word 'together' resonates in his head. He likes the idea of 'being together'. A lot. (Even if the concept seems baffling to him.) "Good. That's exactly what I want it to mean," he reveals in a low whisper - because well, it's a magical and mysterious thing to say and therefore should be spoken like a secret.

He dips forward to kiss Chuuya's pinkened cheek, hot under his lips.

"Perfect," Chuuya says, simple, "we're on the same page, then." He takes a cigarette from the pack and rolls it between his fingers. Reaches for the lighter. It crackles alive with a roll of his tumb, little sparks turning into flames. He lifts the cigarette, a light trembling to his hand as he puts it to his lips; filter burning as it's set alight.

A deep drag, and then he blows out smoke on a sigh. There's something content about it - something triumphant about it.

Dazai traces the whirls of smoke, mesmerised like he's sitting through a hypnotic induction; eyes heavy, head heavy - stuffed with cotton and... romance. He slumps onto Chuuya's shoulder, closing his eyes.

"We should go back to bed," Chuuya says.

Dazai yawns. "Yeah. We'll go back to bed when you've finished your cigarette. If I fall asleep before that, please carry me."

He can practically hear the way Chuuya rolls his eyes. Still, he has no qualms about closing his eyes and letting sleep seep into his body - trusting that he will wake up in a soft bed.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked this chapter, dear reader!
I hope it's not too introspective and boring. I went through 5 billion edits and drafts to get to this point of it *hopefully* not being boring.

Anything I would never want to lose is always lost. It is a given that everything that is worth wanting will be lost the moment I obtain it. --- if that seemed familiar it's because it's a quote from the anime ^^
I also was shameless enough to borrow a quote from The Catcher in the Rye (my favourite book. Holden is best boy): "Certain things, they should stay the way they are. You ought to be able to stick them in one of those big glass cases and just leave them alone."

Also, I feel like I should apologise for the heavy use of italics... but that would require being sorry, and I'm not sure that I am. Like, the whole appeal of fanfiction is that it reads like fanfiction, right? Italics good. I think. I hope.

Thank you SO much for reading. 💖

I Love kudos and comments

13. Hanging out

Chapter Notes

Dazai is so awkward in this. Please forgive him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The car coasts along.

The friction of tires against the road. The purring engine. Acceleration. Deceleration. The constant up and down in speed that’s so typical of city driving.

Dazai’s stomach squelches in protest. So far, it has been very well-behaved, but if he doesn't start dedicating proper attention to suppressing the nausea response, he'll get carsick.

Taking a deep, steadying breath and angling his head towards the window, Dazai lets the morning sun blind him as he fixes his gaze as far ahead as possible. It's effective. The biofeedback from his visual sense matches-up with the car's bouncy movements, combining everything into a coherent sensory image that's meaningful enough to reassure his nervous system; tame the carsickness.

He sinks into the plush car seat. His soft quilted bag feels heavy on top of his thighs; a grounding anchor as the outside world sweeps by in a whirl of traffic.

He breathes against the window - fogging up the glass, creating a little sheet of mist between himself and Yokohama’s streets. Still, even through the veil of his own vapourised breath, the city is as familiar and beautiful as ever: The streets, the shops, the windchimes hanging from the roofs in china town, the squandering seagulls - everything in its right place.

It’s the little things that bring joy. Dazai feels his lips curve into a little smile, and he doesn’t try to stop it.

The car swings into a right turn and continues down Osanbashi-Dori. The cherry trees stand along the edge of the road, shaking off their petals to decorate the street in a fluffy carpet of pastel pink.

Dazai flattens his face against the window, blinking adoringly at the beauty, taking it all in. Just-below-the-surface-nausea aside, the ride is turning out to be rather enjoyable.

Chuuya’s voice breaks Dazai out of his reverie. “Did you miss it?” he asks, voice quietly enthusiastic like he’s exposing a mystery.

“Yokohama? No, I wouldn’t say I missed it. But I’m happy to see it again,” Dazai returns, still looking out the window. “Did you?”

“I think I did.”

Dazai isn’t surprised at all. Chuuya seems like the type to get homesick - what with how generous he is with bestowing his love and attachment on things. It’s admirable, wondrous and bright in a way that makes Dazai feel like his presence is casting a shadow. “Well, I’m sorry I whisked you away to Tokyo, then.”

“Don’t be. I’m glad you did. It was a buzz, and I was a little too busy with other things to notice I missed home.”

“Yes, a good undercover mission does keep your mind occupied, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah...” Chuuya murmurs, soft and lingering like a kiss, “and I like spending time with you.”

What a kicker.

At this point, Dazai shouldn't be shocked by Chuuya’s crude honesty. And he isn't. It’s just that his defences have somehow become so permeable to Chuuya-related-things that even the expected display of sincerity feels like an arrow shooting straight through his chest. And so, since he has no other option, Dazai allows the statement to wedge into his core; to inflate his lungs and push the air out of his mouth on a ragged exhale.

The window fogs up all over again. Obscures his view. Maybe it's time for a change of scenery, then.

Dragging his focus away from the window and looking back at Chuuya, Dazai tries to nudge sweetness and sincerity into his tone when he says, “I’m happy I could distract you from your separation anxiety.” It feels like the wrong thing to say - the words feel phoney as they leave his mouth, and they settle in the ensuing silence like mismatched ornaments.

But Chuuya must understand the pure intention behind them, or maybe he’s just generous enough to receive inappropriate gifts with a smile; his face glows, and his cheeks turn the same shade of pink as the cherry blossoms that rain down outside. “Me too.”

“Me too,” Dazai agrees although it’s all sorts of redundant and awkward. But it’s okay because his echoey expression of agreement trickles off into a companionable halt-in-conversation. A pleasant silence that's uncomplicated in a way that things *never* are.

The car slides into another right turn - then a left turn. They’re arriving at the Armed Detective Agency soon.

All pleasant feelings aside, Dazai can't ignore the drippy sensation that settles in his chest. It's like a wet, leaky sponge and while it could be an evolution of the nausea response... it could also be his body trying to tell him that they're reaching their first destination a little too soon for it to not be a little sad.

He’s bad at goodbyes. Even the easy, transient goodbyes; the see-you-laters. He sighs, idly twiddling the magnetic clasp on his bag, appreciating the satisfying clicking sound that

vibrates through his fingertips as he opens and closes it.

When he lifts his head to look at Chuuya, he finds Chuuya already looking back. There's a pensive smile on his lips that he shakes off so fast that Dazai doesn't quite know what to make of it.

"Do you have any plans for the rest of the day?" Chuuya asks, voice carrying over the rhythmic hum of the car's engine.

"I'll brief the boss, and then I plan to take the rest of the day off. I need to reset my brain."

Chuuya's smile digs into his cheeks, and it produces the most charming little dimples. "How do you reset your brain?"

"With great difficulty," Dazai answers, waving a hand around as to illustrate the flimsiness of the enterprise of brain-resetting. "Unfortunately, I don't have a fail-safe strategy." He lifts a finger and taps his forehead a single time, "brains are complicated. They have billions of neurons and require different resetting procedures depending on the particular state of overload they're in."

"What do you usually do?"

"Mostly I just do nothing." Dazai shrugs, sinking further into the car seat, heavy like the background noise that seems to beg for a more satisfying explanation. With another shrug, he adds, "I like spending time alone -- well, mostly alone. Sometimes I put on a sea-life documentary. Fish are lovely. Quiet and pretty. They offer such wonderful, simple companionship."

Chuuya nods sagely, fingers folding in his lap. "I get that. I like to spend time with my little collection of bonsai trees. They're also, you know... quiet and pretty." His expression is soft with a pure-hearted sincerity that Dazai finds dazzling and inspiring. Maybe Dazai should invest in one of those overpriced bonsai trees for his grotesquely under-decorated apartment - put it on the mantelpiece for all the guests he never invites over to see.

But then again, the bonsai would probably die within a week or less. Dazai doesn't have much faith in his ability to accommodate one of those overly-sensitive little things. There's only room for one overly-sensitive little thing in his apartment, and that's himself. "Bonsai trees are great, they're also kind of hard to love, aren't they? They're delicate and frail, and high maintenance, and..." Dazai trails off. Stops himself before he can spout more self-revealing nonsense.

"Delicate, yes." Chuuya nods, a swift little look passing his face, and there's something almost conspiratorial about it, "but so, so easy to love."

And just like that, Dazai's nervous system starts to feel a little overtaxed. Suddenly, he has to dedicate attention - not only to the continuous suppression of car-sickness - but also to squashing down the rising heat that leaks into his face.

Needing something to hold onto before he melts into the seat, Dazai digs his fingers subtly into the soft quilted fabric of his bag. Everything is overwhelming.

But... If Chuuya thinks trees are lovely, Dazai supposes that it should be safe enough to continue down the treacherous avenue of self-disclosure. “Sometimes… quiet and pretty doesn’t do it for me,” he starts, carefully picking his words and offering them like cherry blossoms, hoping they won’t fall apart on him. “Sometimes, I feel like there’s not a single thing I wouldn't do to not be left alone with my thoughts.”

“Yeah. I know that feeling. I totally get that,” Chuuya says. And suddenly his hand is no longer in his lap but has travelled the distance between them to squeeze Dazai’s wrist, the warm feeling of his ability curling around Dazai like a hug.

It startles a laugh out of Dazai. It’s entirely spontaneous and a little on the unbalanced, crazed side. Embarrassing but at least he’s being straightforward without having to force it. Little victories. “Are you just agreeing with everything I say now, Chu-chu?

“Of course not, don’t be ridiculous,” Chuuya answers promptly. Little lights dance in his eyes, flashing and wavering like they’re connecting dots. “But you know, we talked about this, right? We can distract each other. If you feel like being alone with your thoughts isn’t working for you, and you want a distraction, you could always call me. We could hang out.”

“Yeah,” Dazai says, eyeing the partition. It’s soundproof, but he still feels uncomfortable knowing that the driver is there - right on the other side of the thin screen, kind of third-wheeling this… relationship-talk.

There’s no way around it though. If Dazai wants answers (which he does), he has to ask questions - and he might as well save himself a lot of time and get straight to the point instead of dancing around it in endless circles. “Is hanging out your way of saying having sex?”

Chuuya chokes on air. Cute.

“Oh no, Chuuya. Are you okay?” Dazai reaches out to pat Chuuya's thigh. “Was that too forward a question? I thought for sure that we’d be good to discuss that kind of thing by now.”

Chuuya catches his breath. “We *are*, I just...” he gropes, shakes his head, then nods, “I mean... sex is one thing we could do, but there are no rules to hanging out. We can do whatever we want.”

“I see. That sounds good.” Dazai says, bright and polite, not really knowing what else to say or how to explain that he’s relieved - because while a sexual distraction might expedite the brain resetting process, he’s not sure it’s going to be enough. He also needs other things. Simpler things. Simple companionship.

A sudden deceleration that leads to a complete stop alerts Dazai to the inevitable. He looks out the window, and it only confirms what he already knows; the Armed Detective Agency’s elegant (but slightly run-down) art deco inspired facade looks back at him.

The motor is still humming, singing a melancholic tune as Chuuya unfastens his seatbelt. “So...” he says, but doesn't finish the sentence.

Dazai bites his lip. Pleads with his eyes for Chuuya to say more - to make the goodbye easier.

Chuuya stares back but doesn’t say anything. Useless.

“So,” Dazai finally replies. Just as useless.

Chuuya opens the car door. Doesn't step out. “That was fun we should do it again some time.”

Dazai nods eagerly. “It was wonderfully adventurous. I particularly enjoyed the part where I nearly got shot.”

Chuuya bends at the waist, leans in - his breath a warm puff against Dazai's cheek. “And I particularly enjoyed the part where I had you sprawled under me, so far gone you couldn’t even construct a coherent thought.”

The words tickle the insides of Dazai's stomach, and he swallows a gasp. They're not arguing, so it's not about winners or losers, but Dazai still feels completely owned by Chuuya’s rhetoric skills. “Yeah,” he admits, allowing himself to blush just a little, feeling the heat in his cheeks, “that was fun too.”

Chuuya laughs - except it’s more of a giggle - and it’s ridiculous how Dazai *doesn’t* find the sound annoying, but well, he doesn't. In fact, he kind of likes it. He also likes it when the giggles trail off into a hopeful look on Chuuya’s stupidly pretty face.

“I’ll see you soon, right?” Chuuya asks, with a mildly insistent note to his voice.

“I hope so.” Dazai peeks at Chuuya through his lashes as his restless fingers toy with his bag's clasp again, fiddles with it until it pops open.

Chuuya seems satisfied with the answer, lips stretching into a blinding grin. When he turns to open the car door, Dazai quickly dips a hand into his bag, scours blindly around for the diamond

choker he knows is still there somewhere along with Chuuya’s entire fake aristocrat costume.

Luckily, Dazai's perfect timing never fails. He finds the choker just in time to lean forward and slip it into Chuuya’s trouser pocket as he's stepping out the door.

The door clicks shut behind Chuuya. He’s clearly being mindful not to slam it - controlling his strength like he’s dealing with something very fragile and not a massive metal vehicle.

Dazai watches Chuuya walkaround the back of the car, collecting his bag from the trunk and closing it again with the same kind of compensatory tenderness that's so characteristic of unbelievably strong people.

Dazai wonders if the fluttering tumult in his stomach is the product of fondness and decides that it probably is as he watches Chuuya move along with an exaggerated, confident bounce to his stride - almost like he knows Dazai is looking… He probably *does* know.

The thought is as delightful as it's horrifying. "I can't believe I've become so predictable," Dazai grumbles under his breath.

A sudden impulse to be anything but predictable hits him, and Dazai presses the window control button, rolling the glass down. The swishing mechanical sound has Chuuya wiping his head around, eyes zeroing in on Dazai. Hyperalert.

Good, Dazai likes him to pay attention.

So keeping eye-contact, Dazai picks up his phone, calls Chuuya's number.

---RiiiinnNNNggggGGG---

The ear-splitting ringtone shoots soundwaves through the air like lightning. Chuuya drags his eyes away from Dazai to fish out his phone from his pocket. He checks the display. Looks back up with wide, sparkling eyes. Picks up. "Hello?"

"You said I could call you whenever. Remember?"

"Yes." The corner of Chuuya's mouth lifts into a lopsided grin. Intrigued.

"This is me calling you."

"I can tell."

"I was thinking," Dazai starts, trying to sound confident. "Do you want to come over later? We could hang out."

He watches with private delight as eagerness, relief and joy have a silent war on Chuuya's face, wavering and blending, stars crashing together, forming supernovas that make the early morning mist evaporate around his glowy excitement.

Chuuya nods vigorously, and Dazai would tease him for the use of gestures on a phone call, but then again, it's not like Dazai's can't see all of Chuuya's enthusiastic body language, so it's fine. He nods back. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Chuuya affirms, whispering into the speaker like it's a super-secret phone call. "I'd like that. A lot."

Not really knowing what else to do, Dazai smiles as cheerfully as he can without it feeling like a grimace. There's a strange desire to wink brewing just below the surface, but his excellent decision-making skills crush it down. Winking seems even more awkward than doing nothing. Instead, he dips his head to give Chuuya a look he hopes reads as flirty. "See you later then," he salutes and hangs up.

Chuuya winks because apparently, *he* doesn't care about being awkward - which, good for him. He then spins around and proceeds towards the entrance of the Agency's building. Dazai follows him with his eyes until he disappears behind the front door.

Tap-tap. Dazai gently knocks on the partition, and it rolls down. The chauffeur greets him with a well-bred little thing of a smile. Dazai returns it tenfold, offering the smile he uses so often for social interactions with people he has never met before. It feels a little stale on his lips, but it gets the job done. "Headquarters, please," he says, and the car hums to life again on his command.

『O』

It's early enough that headquarters is mostly quiet - which is in many ways great. It spares Dazai from getting hit by the thick wall of noise that usually greets him when he enters the foyer - spares him from bumping elbows with the crowds as he makes his way up the winding stairs and stumbles inelegantly through the denseness of overwhelm.

It does, however, make his own presence stand out in sharp contrast to the deafening silence; the creaking of Dazai's footsteps echoing through the corridors.

He would take off his shoes to minimise the sound, but with a bag slung over his shoulder and the painting nested under his arm, he feels like he's already carrying enough, so the shoes stay on.

Sacrifices. Dazai supposes he can't have it all.

Deciding to embrace the chaos and just make as much commotion as he possibly can, Dazai takes to whistling a cheery, thoroughly off-pitch tune as he trots along. Up and down the twittering nightingale floors. So much noise.

And on top of that, his stomach feels a little disquieted. It's a strange kind of trembling bellyache, flapping and fluttering like the pages of a book blown around by the breeze on... a windless day. It's bizarre, but at least it gets him in a petulant mood - which is a splendid mood to be in given the task ahead of him: boss interaction time.

"Dazai-sama," the two guards posted in front of Mori's office greet in synchrony, their tight black suits rustling around their shoulders as they bow their heads - also in perfect synchrony.

Dazai beams at them. Nods his head in acknowledgement. "Hi there," he greets amiably, drawing out the last word as he sidles up to them, comes to a stop and arches into a striking pose; hip popped to the side, head tilted. "Missed me while I was gone?" He asks, voice dripping like syrup.

The guards exchange a panicked look, but the wordless communication doesn't seem to help them find an answer.

Sighing dramatically, Dazai rolls his eyes. "It's not a hard question, boys. Just say yes and open the door. The boss is expecting me."

“... The boss didn’t mentio-”

“Don’t worry about that, love.” Dazai cuts in, says it with a smile that’s more overbearing than pleasant. “Just open the door,”

“but-”

“*He’s expecting me*,” Dazai repeats, dropping his voice to a frequency that communicates violence and destruction. If the guards have any intelligence to speak of, they will understand that it means that he isn’t willing to repeat himself again.

“Right,” one of the guards says, lowering his head. “Of course,” the other accords.

And the door creaks open. Dazai slides a saccharine smile back on his face as he purrs a, “thank you, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” He steps forward - passes through the door, making sure to puff his chest like someone who has never lost a bet in their life (and if he does it to overcompensate for the mild sense of foreboding that tangles around him as he enters the boss’ office - well, no one has to know).

The heavy door closes behind Dazai with a loud thud.

“Dazai-kun. Always a pleasure.” Mori smiles like he means it and it’s very convincing.

Dazai stores a mental image of that smile - he might want to recreate it at one point. Not now, though. He bows with very little fanfare and assumes a regal pose. “Likewise, boss.”

“I was expecting you,” Mori croons, his tone of voice matches the blood-red scarf around his neck. Dangerous.

“I know.”

Mori smiles wider, the crows' feet around his eyes deepening. He’s clearly pleased with the answer. “So,” he says, drumming his fingers against his desk, “what has my favourite executive got for me?”

“Everything you asked for,” Dazai replies with a flat intonation and a matching passionless smile - he's not in the mood to offer Mori any emotive reactions - he knows that all Mori will do with those, is take them and over-analyze them. Dazai has enough of that shoddy approach to empathy from himself.

“Just as I expected. I knew I could count on you to take care of this case, Dazai-kun.” Mori reclines in his chair like some big, important head-honcho. Which, sure - he *is* . But there's something so annoyingly self-important about it: The way he sits there in the middle of the room, enthroned at the desk, surrounded by floor-to-ceiling windows, thick red curtains and neatly organised trinkets... It reminds Dazai of a solar system. Celestial, galactic, *orderly*. And Dazai likes order well enough, but he itches to introduce a bit of *dis*order to this particular version of it.

He strolls up to Mori’s desk and deftly places the painting, still wrapped in plastic, on the desk.

“The Great Wave,” Mori acknowledges without checking that it’s, in fact, the painting in question inside the plastic bag. “Good job.” His lips curl into an evil smirk - almost like the approving words are meant as an insult.

Dazai takes a moment to grieve the fact that Mori doesn't know how to show appreciation without making it weird, and then slings his bag from his shoulder. It lands on the desk with an anticlimactic *whomp* (not quite heavy enough to create the melodramatic effect Dazai had hoped for).

Opening the clasp and lifting the flap, he fishes out the chalice from inside the bag. He carefully controls his facial muscles - stops himself from grimacing at the way *No Longer Human* reacts to physical contact with the chalice; its awful ability blasting through him, slimy tendrils wrapping around his gut and twisting.

He throws it at Mori who catches it with one hand, eyes never leaving Dazai. “What’s this?” he asks, voice lifting at the end. Feigned curiosity.

“I was hoping you could tell me,” Dazai says calmly, casually putting his hands into his pockets, “I found it at the Fumiko-gumi's black-market gallery. It was supposed to get auctioned away, but an ability-user with the ability to manipulate blood and his keeper stole it.”

“Oh.”

“Mhmm. But I thought *you* might want it so of course, I couldn’t let them get away with it. It took some convincing, and they tried to kill me during the negotiations -- but with Chuuya’s help, I eventually made them hand it over.”

“What an intriguing story,” Mori says, beaming. The mission report probably reads like a classic fairytale to him.

“Very.” Dazai nods, slipping a biting edge into his voice, “But why are you acting like you didn’t write the outline for that story?”

The corner of Mori’s mouth twitches like he enjoys the act of getting exposed. Quite perverse really. “What do you mean?” he asks in that tone of voice that suggests he knows *exactly* what Dazai means.

Having to explain to Mori what they both know is tedious, but Dazai plays along like the good executive he is. “You knew about this thing, didn’t you?” Dazai flicks the chalice with a finger, hitting the rim. It sends a hollow, pained, metallic noise through the room. “That’s why you were researching blood-type theory the other day when I came to see you, right? You weren’t interested in that pseudoscientific blabber at all. You were trying to give me a hint. Seeding the idea that I had to look out for things relating to blood.”

Stretching a hand, Mori places a finger upon the edge of the chalice’s rim, cutting off the resonating overtones. He looks up at Dazai, nods with self-important grandeur. “You can be quite smart when you choose to apply your intellect.”

“Unlike you. The smart decision is *not* to keep your subordinates in the dark, Mori-san,” Dazai counters, offering his tactical insight, tone dull like a rusty knife that he presses against Mori’s throat. “If you’d warned me about this, I could have planned for it and not nearly died.”

“That may be so.” There is a challenge in Mori’s eyes; he’s crowding right up against Dazai’s defiance, bearing his throat and waiting to see what Dazai will do. “But you didn’t.”

Dazai crosses his arms in front of his chest, sighing deeply. “You’re missing the point.”

“No, the point is that your enemies aren’t going to warn you before they attack. This isn’t me being unfair; this is me tutoring you.”

Dazai doesn’t pout (because that’s not a tactic he thinks is going to do him any favours in this particular interaction) - but he wants to. “I see.”

“You’re smart. I have to work hard to challenge your genius mind, but I intend to keep doing so.” Mori says, offering praise like it’s a curse once again.

“Okay,” Dazai shrugs like it doesn’t matter to him. “Do what you think you need to do.”

“I’m complimenting you, Dazai-kun. I thought you liked that,” Mori purrs in that detached-but-somehow-mildly-amused tone of his that could read as sarcastic or sincere or anywhere in between. It’s simply up to Dazai to decide how he wishes to interpret it.

“Thank you,” Dazai returns, lifting a shoulder in a half-shrug. “Will you forgive me if I don't take your kind words to heart?” he adds, not because it’s important but because sometimes he has to allow himself the satisfaction of being annoying and hurting Mori’s feelings.

“You’re hard to please, my dear.” Mori leans forward, elbows on the desk and chin resting on top of his steepled fingers. He looks up at Dazai with too-discerning eyes, lips curling into a wry smirk. “But Nakahara, knows how to, doesn’t he?” He raises an eyebrow, awaiting Dazai’s reaction.

And to Dazai’s carefully concealed dismay, it’s hard to find an appropriate response. Outright denial is always suspicious, but it’s not like he can agree either - that would be akin to handing over blackmail material willingly...

Plausible deniability seems like the safest option. “I don’t know what you think you know, but you don’t know anything of factual substance,” Dazai says, clipped but composed, knowing that if he allows himself to come apart just a little, Mori will take a scalpel and slice along the seams of that rift.

“No?”

“You think I didn’t check if I was being followed? If there were cameras in the hotel? I did. You weren’t spying on us, so you don’t know what happened between us.”

Mori laughs. It sounds buoyant, genuine. “Oh, Dazai-kun. I don’t need to spy on you. I *know* you.”

Before Dazai can object to that insulting presumption (which he regrettably thinks might be well-founded), Mori says, “don’t worry. I fully endorse this. In fact, I encourage it. The more attached he grows to you, the better. His ability is quite useful, and I'd like to enlist his help more often."

Alarm bells start ringing in Dazai's head. Mori always takes the idea of 'usefulness' to its illogical extreme: exploitation. "I'm not sure about this plan, boss."

"It's a splendid plan. Step one is to have him help you out on missions more often. We'll slowly ease him into it, and once he has gotten more comfortable with the way we operate our mafia affairs, I’ll offer him a position. I just need you to persuade him to accept the offer.”

And just like that Dazai’s cold blood starts boiling. He doesn’t mind playing the occasional game with Mori - doesn't mind posing as the coin-operated machine that Mori puts instructions into until clever plots fall out. But he’s not willing to let Mori toy around with Chuuya like he’s just another pawn in an intricate game-design.

“No.” Dazai leans forward to put less distance between them, staring into Mori’s snake-like slits of eyes with all the venom of his own, “I’m not averse to working together with the ADA, but you won’t be *using* Chuuya like that.”

“It would be tactically advantageous.”

The statement is self-evident, so arguing against it is futile - which means that a change of strategy won’t be enough to win the argument. Dazai has to try to change the game. “It would be tactically advantageous, but it would also blow up in your face one way or another.”

“Why?”

“You should know that one of the defining traits of a game is that it requires voluntary participation.”

“Who is to say Nakahara-kun wouldn't participate voluntarily? I’m sure you could sell the idea to him if you-”

“I’m not going to manipulate him.”

“I see. So *you* are the one who won’t participate? It’s all about you again?”

Despite seeing through Mori’s pitiful attempt at flipping the tables, Dazai can still feel how the words sink barbs into the part of his brain that tends to get caught up in self-doubting loops. He doesn’t have a good comeback to offer, but luckily, he *does* have enough stubbornness to hold his ground. To give Mori a look that he hopes signals just how unwilling he is to yield.

Silence extends into a roaring infinity as Mori pushes back with an unrelenting stare of his own. A silent battle. Iron wills fighting it out. The eye contact stings, but Dazai will hold it until his vision turns white.

Mori is the first to blink. The first to accept defeat (no doubt because he considers it the strategically wise decision for the time being and not because he's admitting defeat). "Very well," he says, leaning back in his chair, "we'll just see what happens."

The answer is slippery; neglecting to make any commitments and very suspicious in its phrasing.

Dazai reckons he has won for the time being though. And winning feels *good*.

Fighting for Chuuya's freedom and honour makes a bouncy little sensation bloom in Dazai's chest. A feeling that he can't place or name; something sweet and flowery (even if it also has a few thorns). He likes it.

"We'll see what happens," he confirms, repeating the flimsy terms, "as long as we agree that you won't *make* things happen. Don't force anyone into situations they shouldn't be in."

Mori's lips curl into a little snicker that would look charming on anyone else. "I suppose that's fair."

"I'm glad we could reach an agreement," Dazai says with an air of finality. He then looks at the chalice, giving it a subtle nod. "Now that I'm here. Do you want to tell me what you know about that thing and the people who were after it, or would that be entirely too much to ask?"

"Not that long ago, I heard rumours that an American organization of ability users had lost an important member - someone with the ability to control blood. His disappearance seemed to correlate with the emergence of this chalice." Mori adjusts the scarf around his neck, picks a lint ball from it with delicate fingers.

Dazai follows the motion with his eyes, trying to decide if it has some hidden meaning. He decides that it *probably* doesn't and moves on. "There was this other fellow, Dostoevsky. He seemed to be the one in charge who had this whole thing orchestrated. Do you know him?"

"Not personally, but his reputation precedes him. If the things I've heard are true, he isn't a pleasant fellow."

"I'd agree with that assessment," Dazai sneers, not bothering to stop the disdain from bleeding into his voice. "What about the chalice? What do you know about it? What *is* it?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," Mori urges with a sly air, full of undertones of demand. Dazai *almost* bristles at having his own words thrown back in his face with such smugness - but only almost. He's used to Mori's antics after all; has fortified his facade against the expected attacks.

He raises an eyebrow, makes a show of expressing how unimpressed he is.

A cackle rips from Mori's mouth. "Oh, come on. Don't tell me you haven't come up with a theory."

It's very tempting to play dumb, but Dazai reckons that he might as well just play his cards. The longer he stands around and waits, the longer he has to… well, stand around and wait.

And patience is a weapon he only wields when it's utterly necessary - not worth wasting on Mori's tedious power plays.

"*Well...*" He pauses dramatically and shifts into his power stance; hands on hips the way he has seen Chuuya do it so many times. "My guess is that the chalice is an ability amplifier designed to interact with blood-related abilities."

"Very good." Mori claps his hands together in a gesture more fitting of a proud parent than a mafia boss. And even if it probably isn't intended that way, Dazai feels a little like he's being ridiculed.

He rolls his eyes. "Okay boss. Now it's *your* turn to tell me about your theories about this chalice."

"The Fumiko-gumi is trying to get a foot into the illicit art trade industry, so naturally I had to plant a mole in the organisation to keep me updated on the types of goods they're able to acquire. When I received reports of this thing-" Mori picks up the chalice and holds it up in the dusty morning light that streams in through the windows.

With his free hand, he runs a finger along the stem, tracing the engravings that are cut into the chalice - gory decorations that resemble veins, arteries, and drops of blood. "-I was intrigued by how much it stood out. It's ornamented in a way that's anachronistic with the roman-catholic design-aesthetic it's otherwise trying to copy. These anatomically correct veins stretching around the stem, the enamelled blood drops - it's inappropriately morbid for a vessel that's supposed to hold sacramental wine during the Eucharist - which means it never belonged in a European church. It's not a real antique."

Dazai nods. "That's what I thought too."

"Which just makes it more interesting. This has been produced with modern scientific methods."

"That's one possibility, but it could also be an extension of an ability..."

"Unlikely. If that were the case, the chalice would vanish when you touch it -- but it doesn't." Mori reaches out, brushes the back of Dazai's hand lightly. The physical contact instantly sets *No Longer Human* alight - it roars in Dazai's bones, gobbles down Mori's ability even though it tastes like sins and nausea, rattles in Dazai's skull like an instant migraine - a blazing inferno.

Mori quickly pulls his hand back. "See," he says, smug. "*No Longer Human* is ravenous; it devours all of the ability it comes in contact with. In conclusion, the chalice itself must exist in the world of solid matter while its ability swims around in the ether.

Dazai swallows his unease, remains steady on his feet, determined to not show how off-balance *Vita Sexualis* makes him feel. "You have too much faith in *No Longer Human's* strength and range."

“And you have too little.” Mori looks Dazai dead in the eyes, kicking off another stare-off session.

Tedious. Dazai doesn't have the energy to sustain the kind of posturing required to interact with Mori. “boss, I-”

“Touch the chalice again. Tell me if I’m wrong.”

Dazai wrinkles his nose but complies; leans forward and strokes the chalice's rounded base with the tip of his finger. It feels icky. It also feels like Mori is right; he can feel its ability bleed into himself, infesting his blood like a parasite while the chalice itself remains solid under his touch. The metal isn't affected by *No Longer Human* at all - it’s simply made of the same chemical reactions that make up everything else in the physical world, no magic to be found there (besides the wonder of chemistry, of course).

He yanks his hand back; pulls the plug on *No Longer Human’s* greed. It stirs, but eventually settles down, retracts into the dark abyss of Dazai’s soul, where it belongs. “You’re right. The chalice itself isn't made of an ability. Somehow, someone has *nserted* an ability into it.”

Mori's eyes glaze over like he’s far away, imagining…

… well, it’s not that hard to guess what he’s imagining.

Dazai arches a brow. “Ah, *that’s* why you wanted the chalice. You want to do experiments on it to learn how to embed abilities into objects.”

“Yes. I’m sure you can guess-”

“You want me to be your lab partner, and once we find out how the ability-transfer works, you want to create a nullification device using *No Longer Human.*

Mori leans back in his chair, a satisfied smirk dangling at the corner of his mouth. “You’re absolutely right, Dazai-kun. You know me so well.”

Putting on a show of being tremendously bored by the whole thing, Dazai sighs deeply (but if he's being honest, the prospect of doing scientific experiments in the lab appeals to him; looking through microscopes and cutting things up with lasers seems more intellectually stimulating than his usual executive responsibilities).

Mori chuckles like he knows what Dazai is thinking. “I’ll put together a little team and set things up. We’ll start tomorrow.” It sounds like a dismissal, and Dazai is more than happy to take that dismissal and run with it.

“Okay〜 sounds good. See you tomorrow then,” Dazai trills, shifting his weight, shuffling backwards - so ready to get away from Mori and his galactic office, “I’m going to take the rest of the day off so don’t call unless there’s an emergency.”

“Of course, the Tokyo trip must have been overwhelming for you. So much noise and visual stimulation, right?” The way Mori says it makes it sound more like a conclusion that a

question. Which is annoying, but Dazai has never been able to do much about Mori being annoying or having more insight into Dazai's character than Dazai would like. It's an utter outrage, but it is what it is. Dazai nods reluctantly.

"Do what you need to do," Mori flicks a hand as though swatting at a fly. "See you tomorrow, Dazai-kun. Medical wing, lab 107. We're meeting at-"

"You don't have to tell me, boss. I always know when you expect me to show up, don't I?" Dazai says, pivoting on his heel and taking off, waving a hand behind him as an insincere parting gift. The low, ghostly clang of Mori's chuckles serve as an accompanying soundtrack as he marches out the door.

『O』

Dazai's apartment greets him the way it always does. With roaring silence and a thick wall of cold air. He really should consider turning on the heat. Especially if Chuuya is coming over. Good impressions and all that.

He takes off his shoes and arranges them semi-orderly in the genkan.

There's a padded hanger in the closet for his coat. Dazai blinks at it. Then shoves off the coat, and throws it into the bottom of the closet, closing the door to hide the mess. The coat is going to crease, and he's not going to care - it will give him an excuse to buy a new one. He'd probably look dashing in one of those long, sand-coloured trench coats - mafia dress code be damned. Beige is the new black.

The floor is cold and hard against his feet as he proceeds into the kitchen. He really should consider investing in slippers.

There's still a bit of a mild stomach ache going on, and Dazai doesn't recognise it as hunger, but then again, he never really registers hunger. He has a nagging suspicion that it might exist without him being aware of it, though… so trying to squash the discomfort down with a bit of food seems worth a try.

He opens the refrigerator door. Looks inside. It's empty aside from the hum of the cooling system and a bottle of cheap corner store saké - as empty as when he left for Tokyo. Which shouldn't be surprising; the thing isn't in the habit of filling itself up. He really should consider getting into a habit of buying food.

A little sigh falls from Dazai's lips as he closes the fridge door again. He lumbers to the kitchen island, drags out a chair, collapses into it; limbs feeling weary as he perches his elbows on the counter, resting his head in his hands.

There's a bowl of fresh fruit on the counter - Kouyou has a fresh delivery sent to his place every week. Dazai doesn't particularly care for fruit, but something about the symbolism of red apples speaks to him, so he decides that he may as well make Kouyou happy and eat an apple.

The apple crunches in his mouth. It tastes decent enough, but the texture is strange.

“Bleh.” He grimaces at the apple but dutifully takes another bite. Chews. *Crunch-crunch.*

Dazai pulls out his phone from his pocket, a game of virtual chess calling to him. But just as he’s about to launch a game, the door intercom buzzes - a low annoying hum.

Dazai skips into the entryway and presses the button to answer the call. “Hiiiiii,” he sings, a little overenthusiastic.

“Good morning Dazai-san, this is Suzuki Yui from the front desk.”

Dazai puts on a charming smile for no one - well, he hopes she’s able to hear it in his voice. “What can I do for you, darling?”

“I- uh. You have a visitor, sir. Nakahara Chuuya is here to see you.”

“Yes-yes. I’m expecting him. Send him up, sweetheart.”

Dazai unlocks the door, pushing it wide open and leaning against the door frame. The very picture of casualness.

His head feels light like a balloon flying above his body, and his stomach is still protesting against an unknown problem; waves and confetti somersaulting inside him.

---*piiiiIIIiiingGGGgg*--- the elevator control system a little further down the corridor signals an incoming arrival. The door opens with a lush *woosh*.

Chuuya steps out, hideous monster combat boot first. There’s a fluid grace to his movements, and Dazai recognises him by that grace and the atrocious fashion sense alone -- because his *entire upper-body* is hidden behind a massive glass container that he carries in his arms.

Light bounces off and distorts when it hits the container - it’s full of water.

Interesting. Dazai grins. “O-hoy Chuuya, feeling thirsty?”

“Funny,” Chuuya returns, sarcasm dripping from his voice in a way that sounds more enamoured than annoyed.

Chuuya strolls down the corridor so smoothly he’s practically floating. And as he comes closer, Dazai sees it. Two fish - *koi fish,* Dazai notes - swirling around inside the massive glass container. Which, of course, means it isn’t just any old glass container - it’s an aquarium.

“What is that?” Dazai still asks (because although he knows what it is, he doesn't feel qualified to judge its purpose).

“It’s for you!” Chuuya announces, which isn't a good answer but he sounds awfully proud of himself, and that's cute, so Dazai accepts it.

“For me? You shouldn’t have.” Dazai dips his chin and gazes up from under his bangs, “but it’s very nice of you. I love gifts.”

It’s not entirely true - most things of a certain complexity aren’t. Dazai isn’t the biggest fan of gifts. It’s so rare that he receives any, that he tends to have a knee-jerk adverse response to them out of sheer unfamiliarity. This is a delightful exception though, so Dazai feels justified in bending the truth.

He steps aside and lets Chuuya enter. Watches as Chuuya bends at a perfect angle to set the aquarium down like it weighs nothing. And Dazai can’t see the tell-tale red glow of *For The Tainted Sorrow* - neither around Chuuya or the aquarium - but surely Chuuya has to be using his ability because he’s not that strong without it… is he?

Well, that’s an empirical question, and Dazai notes it down as something to be tested in the bedroom at a later point.

Chuuya takes off his shoes and arranges them neatly in the genkan, then straightens up, puts his hands by his hips, tilts his head and looks at Dazai in an expectant way that makes Dazai feel like he's not ready to be looked at. "What?"

“Where do you want this?” Chuuya asks, nodding towards the aquarium.

Following Chuuya's gaze, Dazai looks at the aquarium. He gets a little lost in the way the fish dance in the water; slow rhythmic movements. Swivelling, twirling-

“Dazai?”

Dazai forcibly rips his focus from the paralysingly visually pleasing fish and back to Chuuya - Chuuya who is blinking like he’s waiting for a response to something.

So Dazai replays their conversation in his head - and right, there’s a question he still hasn’t answered. “I'm sure I can find the perfect spot for it in the living room.” He spins around and leads the way, beckons Chuuya with a hand, “come on.”

With his gaze drifting over his shoulder, he watches as Chuuya picks up the aquarium, lifts it easily - once again giving off the impression that it somehow weighs little more than peanuts. It’s all quite remarkable.

“Chuuya is so much stronger than he looks,” Dazai chirps, tongue-in-cheek irreverence to conceal just how impressed- how *intrigued* he is (yes, he is still planning on cajoling Chuuya into demonstrating what else he can do with that strength). He observes with delight as Chuuya’s cheeks pinken. Always, always so responsive.

Stepping into his mostly empty-of-furniture living room, Dazai looks around. Finding a good spot for the aquarium is a bit of a challenge - putting it on the floor seems wrong and anti-climatic, it deserves a proper exhibition spot.

Well…

“Can you set it on the coffee table?”

“Seriously?”

“Yes. I want to look at my new fish-friends from the couch.”

“Yeah okay. I guess that makes sense.” Chuuya carefully places the massive aquarium on top of the table.

The look on his face when he cranes his head to meet Dazai’s eyes is blinding. Sparkling with the kind of brightness that channels his deepest desires - like he's looking directly at the thing he has set his heart on. Dazai has seen art snobs send that kind of look in the direction of overpriced antiques about a million times.

“So. Do you like your present?” Chuuya steps closer, crowding Dazai’s space.

Yes. Dazai likes it. A lot. It’s absolutely perfect and everything he never knew he wanted... and his eyes hurt inside their sockets, and he feels a little like he might throw up - his emotions screwing up like a gear that has gotten jammed.

He shakes it off. Puts on a smile. “Of course I like it, Chuuya. Don’t I look like I like it?” He frames his face between his hands, batting his lashes.

Chuuya laughs. “Not exactly, no. You look a little overwhelmed,” he flops down on the couch and pats the spot next to him, looking up at Dazai, “but that’s okay, you don’t have to look any particular way.” Chuuya’s smile stretches, utterly guileless like he’s not being a little rude for bringing attention to the fact that Dazai’s composure has cracked, leaving scattered pieces all over the place.

Dazai sits down next to Chuuya, folding into a cross-legged position. “Well, I do like it. I like it a lot.” His voice breaks unexpectedly towards the end, revealing more of the dumb insecurities that lay dormant inside him until he wants someone so badly, that they bubble up to the surface and impair his ability to form polite conversation. At this point, those pesky self-doubts are going to start leaking out of his ears, and Dazai is losing the will to hold it all back.

“Good,” Chuuya beams, a hand landing on Dazai’s thigh - lightly - but still startling in that strange way where Dazai’s body remains static-still and unfazed on the outside but erupts into colourful fireworks just beneath the facade of his bandages. His skin- his blood- his bones tingle.

He stares straight ahead, watches his precious fish swirl around, wondering if they're as blinded by Chuuya’s… Chuuya-ness as he is.

Lifting a hand, Dazai places it delicately on top of Chuuya’s. Cold and warm meeting - *No Longer Human* roaring at the contact, hungrily gulping up Chuuya’s warmth. Dazai cringes, his hand is neither shaky nor sweaty, so it’s not exactly giving him away. Still, it feels like a dead fish that he has just casually slapped on top of Chuuya’s nice, warm presence - a pretty tactless thing to do to someone who gifts you pretty, *living* fish.

So he withdraws his hand again, suppresses the unnecessary impulse to pick at the skin by his thumbnail. Awkward.

And to make matters worse, he remembers that he has completely forgotten to say the magic words. “Thank you,” he murmurs, his voice sounding a little alien to his own ears, and as much as he wants to think that Chuuya won’t deride him for failing to show his gratitude in a suitable way, he still feels that he ought to glaze his reactions with a bit more passion. Most people expect a bit of a performance. Just a little.

“Thank you,” he says again, seeking Chuuya’s eyes, trying to communicate his gratefulness with a soft look. It feels a bit like a too-tight grimace slapped across his face with unflattering face-paint that cracks at the edges to reveal absolutely nothing underneath. A gap where the proper response should be. One thing is acting - that Dazai can do. Another thing entirely is being *natural*, and for some reason, that’s infinitely more difficult for Dazai.

And although he knows this game he's playing with Chuuya is one where honesty is the winning strategy, he seriously considers just faking a fitting reaction.

But before he can act on that impulse, Chuuya distracts him by bumping their shoulders together. “You’re so welcome.”

It’s a reassuring gesture, but Dazai isn’t an idiot. He has inserted himself into Chuuya’s life and kept his position there only by relying on luck and his talent for keeping the worst of his weird quirks below the parapet… Dazai swallows the racing thoughts and lifts his head to shoot Chuuya a smile - finds Chuuya staring back at him with furrowed brows.

Dazai breaks eye contact. Looks back at the fish. Orange, black, white. Pretty swirls. Nice and simple. *It’s all going to be okay* the fish seem to whisper, reassuring him that he won’t ruin everything with his paralysing self-awareness.

“Dazai?” Chuuya’s voice throws a wrench into the illusion of simplicity.

“Yes.” Dazai looks back at Chuuya, forcing his facial features into something friendly yet stoic.

“Are you nervous?” Chuuya asks, eyes soft if a little incredulous.

“No,” Dazai says, and it feels like gravel coming out of his mouth, but at least it sounds as convincing as he wants it to; simple and concise.

Or maybe not that convincing, because Chuuya’s nose scrunches like someone who has sniffed a lie. “You *are*. Why are you nervous?” he shuffles impossibly closer, studying Dazai’s reactions up close, his scrutiny sinking little hooks into Dazai’s facade. Pulling. Tearing.

Dazai shakes his head as the realisation falls down upon him. Maybe he *is* nervous. Maybe that explains the quiet fluttering in his stomach and his sudden lack of suaveness...

But all of that evidence won’t stop him from denying it. He will deal with nervousness the same way that he deals with everything else he doesn’t know how to deal with: he’ll just step over it, step around it, pretend it doesn’t exist. “I’m not *nervous*. I’m just concerned that we won’t know how to be together when we don’t have a plan for being together.”

Chuuya blinks once, twice -- then breaks into a laugh. “Worried and concerned are synonymous.”

Dazai gives Chuuya the particular withering look that he has perfected over many years - the one he pulls out in interrogations when he wants to make hostages cry.

Chuuya cuts off the laugh by biting his lip, but he still smiles; perpetually unruffled by Dazai’s threats. Something that either speaks to stupidity or incredible character strength. Or maybe, impossibly, he simply isn’t put off by the violence that lives inside Dazai…

It’s strange, but no matter how hard Dazai looks, he finds no judgement when he looks at Chuuya, only curiosity.

In many ways, Dazai finds the idea of deflecting and leaving this topic on the backburner of his existential anxiety very appealing. But at the same time, there’s a tingling sensation in his core - something like intuition - which tells him that indulging Chuuya’s curiosity is worth a try. He tilts his head in silent permission, indicating that he’s ready to answer hard questions.

“Why is the way we choose to hang out a concern to you?” Chuuya asks.

“There’s usually more structure to the way we hang out. We train together. We go on missions together. We-”

“Kick people’s asses together.”

“*Exactly*.”

“And now we're just going to sit here and look at fish together. It’s going to be grand.”

Dazai feels a smile creep across his face. “That’s not much of an activity, though. Is that enough?” He wants it to be. He really, really wants it to be.

“Of course, it is.” Chuuya sounds so sure, and something about his tone reads as an invitation. So, feeling brave, Dazai wraps an arm around Chuuya's shoulder. Chuuya leans into it, hand still resting on Dazai's thigh, rubbing small circles.

It’s comfortable like that. Warm and... *natural*.

Soft daylight streams in through the window, reflecting in the water like ripples of liquid light, dancing in Chuuya’s hair. It looks like fire, and for all Dazai likes this newfound tenderness, his streak of violence still wants to play with that fire.

So he reaches out, runs his hands through Chuuya’s hair, spins the soft flamey locks around his fingers. He pulls gently, and it elicits a content-sounding hum from Chuuya that Dazai just has to steal from his mouth -- just a light peck before he pulls back, hands still in Chuuya’s hair as he sinks deeper into the cushions, staring straight ahead at his fish-friends.

Simple companionship. “I’m naming the white one with orange and black dots Rain. You can name the other one if you want.”

There’s a long pause and then. “They’re both white with orange and black dots.”

“No, Chuuya. The other one is orange with black and white dots, of course.”

“Of course, how could I miss that.”

“I don’t know either. It’s so obvious.” Dazai says with a teasing note to his voice. He’s starting to feel comfortable in that boneless sort of way, so he stretches out on the couch, puts his head in Chuuya’s lap. “So. Are you going to name it?” He looks up at Chuuya, enjoying the view from this new angle. It's a lot like stargazing.

"Hmm..." Chuuya tapers off into silence and time seems to disappear into timelessness. He must be thinking very hard about what to name the fish.

He runs a hand through Dazai's hair, pools a lock within his fist and squeezes gently. “See how well hanging out is going.”

“That’s a very unique name.”

“I’m still thinking about a name," Chuuya says, brushing the fringe out of Dazai's eyes, "it was just a statement, mackerel.”

Dazai nods. Chuuya's statement is true. This 'hanging out' thing is going disgustingly perfectly. Dazai is pretty sure he could live on hanging out; spent the rest of his lonely afternoons being anything but lonely with Chuuya’s warmth surrounding him. “I like-” he stops himself. 'Like' isn't the right word. He swallows his hesitation and sits up, hoping an upright position will make it easier to tell the truth without it getting stuck in his throat. He licks his lips and meets Chuuya’s eyes through the feathered edges of his lashes. Lets out the words he truly wants to say. “I *love* hanging out with you.”

And then, Dazai feels Chuuya’s breath brushing against his cheek, quivering and warm. So close. Close enough to set every fibre of Dazai’s being alight with electricity, singing for intimacy. Anticipation like magnetism. Dazai’s eyes hook onto the pretty bow of Chuuya’s lips, bringing his own closer to seal the confession with a shard breath.

And he doesn’t even have to take it - Chuuya offers it freely, meets him halfway, lips soft and hot, prying Dazai mouth open until he melts. It’s ruthlessly tender, and Dazai likes it that way despite himself. It’s hard to believe soft and tender can be enough, but it feels like a sweet elixir that keeps expanding, filling every crevice of his frazzled mind.

Dazai breaks the kiss to catch his breaths, panting against Chuuya's mouth. He meets Chuuya's eyes, and it's such a beautiful view; his pupils are swimming, big and unfocused inside the blue sea of his eyes.

"Hi there," Dazai says, still a little breathless.

"Hi," Chuuya returns, his pretty, pink, kiss-swollen lips stretching into a smile. “I *love* hanging out with you too.”

Chapter End Notes

The End.
Okay so this has been such a journey and I'm getting oddly emotional about this but I hope this ending was satisfying and cathartic enough.
THANK YOU ALL FOR READING AND COMMENTING AND BEING SO WONDERFUL. I absolutely adore you all - you're too nice to me and your words are a constant source of beauty and inspiration to me.
<3<3<3<3
Thank you all again and see you soon? I hope.
If you wanna chat you can find me on twitter: @run_mello
Lots of love and red camellias for you all!

End Notes

Thanks for reading ♡♡♡

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